



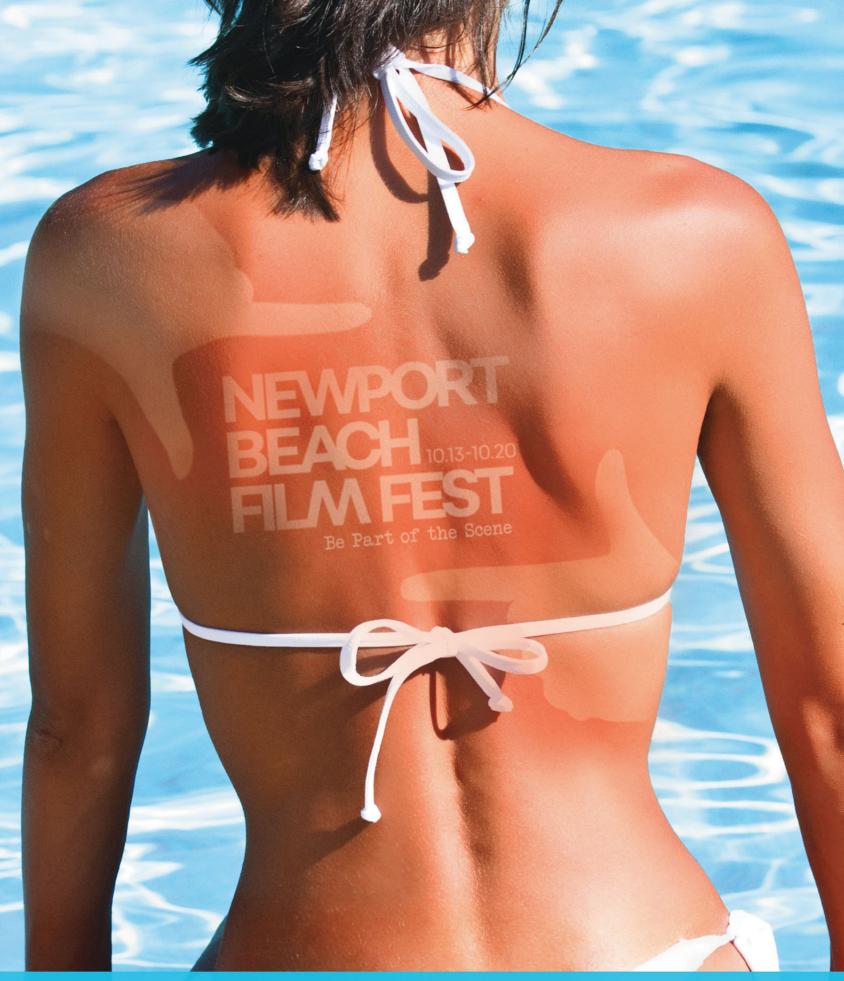






NETFLIX













UCI Health







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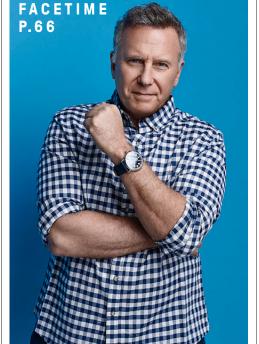
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Pau1

Reiser

JENNIFER SALKE

ON RECEIVING
THE 2022 VARIETY
VANGUARD AWARD





WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 28 LOS ANGELES

1 JACQUELINE MARTINEZ GARCEL (RECIPIENT OF THE SOCIAL IMPACT AWARD PRESENTED BY GOOGLE) 2 SNOH AALEGRA 3 OPRAH WINFREY & "QUEEN SUGAR" DIRECTORS 4 HILLARY CLINTON & CHELSEA CLINTON 5 MALALA YOUSAFZAI & QUINTA BRUNSON 6 SYDNEY LEROUX 7 VARIETY 2022 WOMEN'S IMPACT REPORT HONOREES WERE EACH GIFTED A CUSTOM BRACELET COURTESY OF KENDRA SCOTT 8 2023 CADILLAC ALL-ELECTRIC LYRIQ DISPLAY 9 OPRAH WINFREY & AVA DUVERNAY 10 MICHELLE SOBRINO-STEARNS & PAYTON IHEME (HEAD OF AMERICAS, PUBLIC POLICY, BUMBLE) 11 SHELLEY CURTIS LITVACK (PRODUCER/DIRECTOR), KRISTIAN ALFONSO, MICHAEL FEENEY (EVP, CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS, A+ENETWORKS) 12 TINX WITH VARIETY POWER OF WOMEN GIFT BAG 13 MANDY MARTIN (VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS, DIRECTV), MICHELLE FINE-SMITH (VP, GLOBAL CONSUMER PARTNERSHIPS, VARIETY), GEORGETTE DAGGETT (SR. BRAND CONSISTENCY MANAGER / PRODUCT MARKETING MESSAGING MANAGER, DIRECTV), NICK BIANCHI (AVP PRODUCT MARKETING MANAGEMENT, DIRECTV) 14 NIECY NASH & DIA NASH 15 LINDA DUNCOMBE (EVP & CHIEF MARKETING, PRODUCT AND DIGITAL OFFICER, CITY NATIONAL BANK) 16 KATHRYN HAHN & ELIZABETH OLSEN 17 CHANNING DUNGEY (CHAIR & CEO, WARNER BROS. TELEVISION STUDIOS), QUINTA BRUNSON, AYO DAVIS (PRESIDENT, DISNEY BRANDED TELEVISION), KAREY BURKE (PRESIDENT, 20TH TELEVISION) 18 CHELSEA CLINTON, HILLARY CLINTON, MALALA YOUSAFZAI, ELIZABETH OLSEN, AVA DUVERNAY & JACQUELINE MARTINEZ GARCEL

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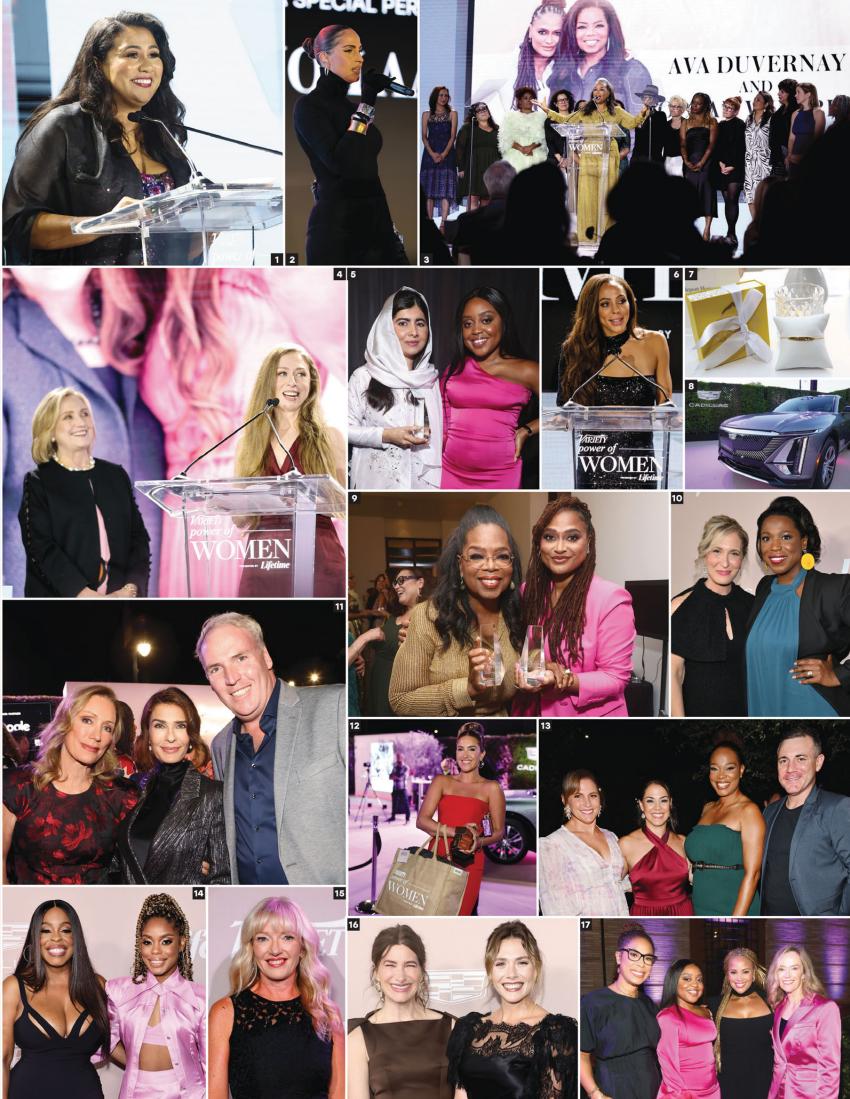












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Amazon Studios Grows Up With Some Tolkien Magic





CO-EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Cynthia Littleton

Ramin Setoodeh

Looking back over a decade of disruption in entertainment, there's a case to be made that Amazon has been the biggest change agent among the tech giants that have barreled into Hollywood.

Netflix was born as a content distributor. YouTube and Facebook are intent on selling eyeballs to advertisers. Apple made its first big move into content more than 30 years ago with Pixar.

But Amazon wasn't a given, especially considering how costly and complex producing original content is. The e-commerce titan's efforts have reached new heights over the past four and a half years with the dawn of "The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power," steered by our cover subject, Jennifer Salke, who has led Amazon Studios since early 2018.

From the start of Amazon's original content efforts in 2013 (remember "Alpha House" and "Betas"?), the Seattle-based colossus brought a different business mindset to building a programming platform. As Salke explains in our cover story, Amazon Studios' North Star mandate is to keep Amazon Prime users engaged with the platform and happy with their annual membership.

This made Amazon the first major content player to use video to sell products directly to consumers via the same one-click-away platform that serves up the video. It's as if Macy's carved a giant video screen into the facade of its Herald Square citadel.

As Salke entered the Amazon arena nearly five years ago, she inherited what seemed like an impossible quest to deliver a new iteration of J.R.R. Tolkien's beloved "LOTR" franchise. Just before Salke's arrival, the company earmarked a jaw-dropping \$250 million and a five-season production commitment to secure rights to revisit Middle-earth on TV.

Salke's main job was assembling the right creative team to execute the show. The pressure only increased when an obscure New Zealand regulatory filing disclosed that Amazon had budgeted nearly \$450 million for the series. A good deal of those startup costs will be amortized significantly over five anticipated seasons of "Rings of Power." Still, it's a big number that has hung over the series.

There are so many ways "Rings of Power" could have been a disaster. By the measure of worldwide fan reaction and Nielsen streaming charts, "Rings of Power" avoided the worst problems that often bog down big-budget productions.

With the show's Season 1 finale looming, Variety will fete Salke and Amazon Studios at Mipcom on Oct. 18 with the Variety Vanguard Award recognizing contributions to the global television industry. As a leader who paid her dues at 20th Century Fox TV and NBC Entertainment, Salke has earned a moment to take a round of applause from her peers — before Team "Rings" goes right back to work on Season 2.

Contributors





Variety executive editor of international Manori Ravindran met with up-and-coming British actor Harris Dickinson in London to talk about "Triangle of Sadness" on the hottest day of the U.K.'s blistering heat wave.



Asia editor Patrick Frater spoke with Changin' Pictures founder Peter Chan, and is off to the Busan Film Festival as the Asian movie industry returns to in-person events: "I've known and admired Peter Chan for nearly 25 years. He is rigorous, thoughtful and dogged."



Associate art director Tarryn Silver worked on this week's Entertainment Gaming Leaders list and cites her years of playing Tetris obsessively as preparation: "Impact lists are allways a puzzle but so satisfying when they come together."



Photographer Art Streiber captured Amazon Studios chief Jennifer Salke on the Culver Studios lot Sept. 28: "I wanted to make portraits that bridged Hollywood history, working in and around one of the industry's original studios with the head of a 21st-century streaming company."

OBI-WAN CENOBI

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KUDOS.



JENNIFER SALKE

AMAZON STUDIOS HEAD

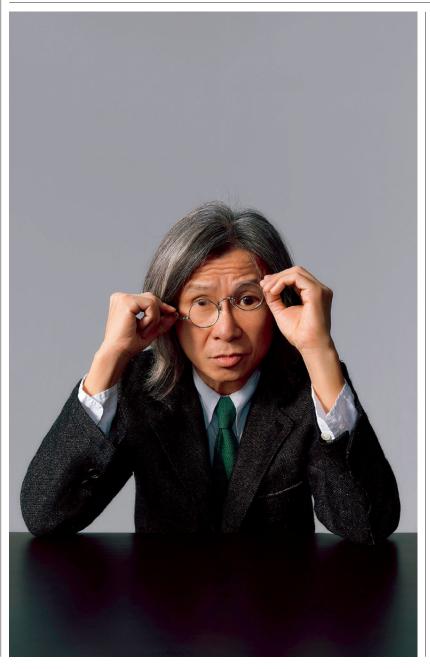
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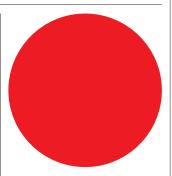
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BIZ+BUZZ



Asia's Free Agent for Change

Peter Chan hopes to build a busy indie studio with his latest venture in Hong Kong



Hong Kong multi-hyphenate Peter Chan Ho-sun is far too intellectual to call himself an "arms dealer," as Sony Pictures has in casting itself as an unattached supplier to streaming platforms.

But politeness and Bob Dylan references aside, Chan's new company, Changin' Pictures, aims to become a major independent purveyor of premium Asian TV content for the streamers. The company is using this week's Busan Intl. Film Festival as its launchpad and will unveil the first five series of its 20-title pan-Asian slate.

By Patrick Frater

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"We can't wait for the streamers to finance a show, judge it with their algorithms and test screen things."

Chan's thesis is that global audiences are hungry for Asian content but have not been able to access it easily under legacy film and TV distribution systems. With streaming making everything accessible everywhere, and audiences no longer balking at subtitles, quality Asian drama can and will travel.

His benchmark examples include not only "Squid Game," which was conceived locally in South Korea and became a worldwide phenomenon via Netflix, but also Apple TV+'s "Pachinko." The Asia-set multilingual drama was not made specifically for Korean or Japanese viewers, but it was authentic enough to work for global audiences including those in both countries.

Chan has a fine track record, helming hits "The Warlords" and "American Dreams in China," producing "Bodyguards and Assassins" and exec producing Oscar-nominated "Better Days." But his place in history arguably comes from launching the pan-Asian co-production movement at the beginning of the century.

Calling on his Thai-Chinese-Hong Kong heritage and (incomplete) education in the U.S., Chan and his Applause Pictures worked with filmmakers including Kim Jee-Woon, Park Chan-wook, Miike Takashi, Hur Jin-Ho, Nonzee Nimibutr and the Pang Brothers on a slate of independently produced Asian movies. These included "The Eye" and "Jan Dara," which were innovative and fresh enough to play festivals, spawn mini-franchises and get remade, and yet were local enough to enjoy decent box office around East Asia.



Then, with the rise and decadelong opening of the Chinese film industry from 2012 onward, Chan spent much of his time exploring the rocky path between the mainland Chinese and Hong Kong industries.

"This new venture is something I started 20 years ago," Chan jests. "I wanted to do this long before COVID, but the pandemic gave me time to think it through."

A trio of well-funded producer-led companies — Golden Karavan, RSVP and Applause Entertainment — are already operating in a similar fashion within India. But Chan refutes the idea that his director-driven Changin' Pictures is late to the streaming party or that the "content is king" moment has passed now that streamers

are reining in their content acquisition costs: "The only difference between now and 20 years ago is that the cost of distribution and exhibition are much lower [on streaming] and that we know audiences are crazy for Asian content."

A key part of Changin' Pictures' modus operandi will be to develop and, if necessary, produce its shows before engaging with the platforms.

"We can't wait for the streamers to finance a show, judge it with their algorithms and test screen things," says Chan, who is also keen to retain some skin in the game for his filmmakers. "The power of the streamers is huge, meaning that if you do things their way, the producer likely only gets cost plus 10%. Or, these days, cost plus eight."

The 2007 hit "The Warlords" was an earlier gathering of top Asian names assembled by Peter Chan Ho-sun.

To ensure the new firm's independence from streamers' studio-like tendencies and to escape the institutional censorship he endured in China, Chan put several million dollars of his own money into Changin' Pictures and raised close to nine figures of U.S. capital. He remains discreet about his backers but says most of his financing comes from Hong Kong and Singapore, or Chinese sources who have kept some of their cash outside the mainland. And he says that he won't accept dilution into a minority ownership position.

It is an arsenal big enough to allow the Changin' Pictures team to call the shots and take some risks. They plan to spend up to \$2.5 million per episode on production — that's far higher than average TV production budgets in Asia and higher than many Asian feature film costs — and, strategically, to start with Korean-language series.

"We have two very good scripts. Both were unanimously approved by our greenlight development team. And both were adapted from popular webtoons," says Chan, explaining the calculation behind not using Changin' Pictures' Donnie Yen or Zhang Ziyi vehicles for the opening gambit.

Chan also calculates that producing premium content for streaming may be "10 times less risky" than Asian producers' traditional dependence on theatrical box office.

So the first two projects will be greenlighted without the cover that comes with a commission or presale. "We have to show that we are not bluffing. We have to bite the bullet," he says.

Spoken like a true gunslinger.



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Blind Optimism or Fraud?

MoviePass' former leaders have run afoul of the SEC, which claims they lied about their business

By Gene Maddaus



Mitch Lowe, the former CEO of MoviePass, recently published a book, "Watch and Learn," in which he offers business and life lessons from a self-described "Zen disruptor." On his press tour, he has been repeatedly asked to explain why his company imploded.

He has answered that the subscription service had a good strategy, but not enough time.

"We ran out of money," he told the "Bloomberg Businessweek" podcast.

The SEC has a different take. Late last month, it filed a fraud complaint against Lowe and Theodore Farnsworth, the CEO of parent company Helios and Matheson Analytics, stating the execs knew their business model would never be profitable, and lied about it over and over again.

MoviePass is hardly the first company to make extravagant claims about future profitability, only to crash and burn. And if blind optimism and bad unit economics were a crime, then half of Silicon Valley would be facing similar charges.

But the SEC is focused less on Lowe and Farnsworth's bold predictions than on the factual basis underlying them. For example, the agency notes that the execs claimed to have done rigorous market testing that showed their all-you-can-watch, \$9.95-a-month price point would be profitable. In fact, according to the complaint, no such testing was done.

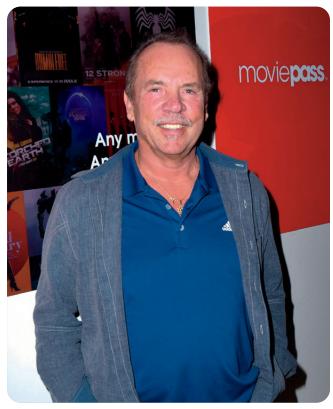
At another point, Farnsworth claimed to have "17 months' worth of cash" at a time when his CFO was worried the company would be insolvent by the next week.

"It's kindergarten rules — tell the truth," says Scott Mascianica, a former SEC lawyer now at Holland & Knight. "If you are disclosing truthful information, that is the easiest way to avoid pitfalls going forward."

Farnsworth has claimed that he always acted in "good faith," while Lowe's attorneys have said that bringing new concepts to market is bound to be "disruptive and uneven."

"The broader question is how much latitude do startups have to hype their product to consumers with the idea of building up a consumer base," says Robert Mintz, who practices white-collar defense at McCarter & English. "The heart of the SEC's complaint is you can't mislead investors in order to attract money with the notion that you'll figure out later on if the statements you made to them to get them to invest are ultimately viable or not." ?

The SEC has filed a complaint against former MoviePass CEO Mitch Lowe for his past statements.



Late-Night Flight





Trevor Noah became the latest late-night host to announce his departure last week, joining an exodus including Samantha Bee, "Desus & Mero" and James Corden. Noah, who was Jon Stewart's handpicked successor at "The Daily Show," did not set an end date, but indicated he missed being on the road after seven years in the hosting chair.

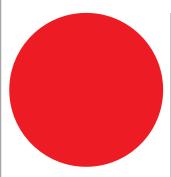
- Samantha Bee: In July, Warner Bros. Discovery pulled the plug on "Full Frontal With Samantha Bee" after seven seasons on TBS. What's next: She's producing a kids' sketch show called "Best Day Ever."
- "Desus & Mero": Desus Nice and the Kid Mero decided to go their separate ways after four seasons on Showtime, announcing their series' end in July.
- James Corden: In April, "The Late Late Show" host revealed that he would leave his perch in a year, ending a run on the CBS program that began in 2015 and spawned the popular "Carpool Karaoke" franchise. What's next: Fulwell 73 partner Corden is expected to return to his native U.K. once he wraps up his late-night gig.
- Conan O'Brien: The flamehaired host exited the after-hours scene last year and is now concentrating on podcasts. •

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Wait. What Did George R.R. Martin's Collaborators Say?

Critics on Twitter are breathing fire at the married authors' offensive comments about inclusive casting in fantasy shows

By Ethan Shanfeld



Bestselling fantasy author and "House of the Dragon" executive producer George R.R. Martin is caught in the crossfire of the heated battle over inclusive casting — and some of his fans are calling for a boycott of his upcoming book due to comments by his coauthors.

Out Oct. 25, "The Rise of the Dragon: An Illustrated History of the Targaryen Dynasty, Volume One" is being touted as a "deluxe reference book" for those itching to learn more about Westeros' most powerful family. When Martin publicized it on social media last week, thousands of fans responded in outrage, many calling out the problematic behavior and "history of racism" of his coauthors, married couple Linda Antonsson and Elio M. García Jr. "I will not be buying anything with Linda and Elio attached to it," one wrote, while others urged Martin to sever ties with the coauthors.

Now the coauthors are fighting back, with Antonsson insisting to *Variety* that she is not a racist and García saying he feels under attack for sticking to his views about Martin's original works.

The "Game of Thrones" superfans have been collaborating with Martin since before HBO's hit ad-



aptation of his "A Song of Ice and Fire" books. Soon after Antonsson and García created Westeros.org, an online forum, in 1999, Martin recruited them as fact-checkers for his book "A Feast for Crows." In 2014, they served as coauthors on "The World of Ice & Fire," an illustrated companion book for the series of novels.

Critics have taken issue with Antonsson's blog posts, some dating to more than a decade ago, in which she decries the casting of POC actors in "Game of Thrones" roles that are white in Martin's books. In one post from March 2012, for example, Antonsson complained about a Black man getting cast in the role of Xaro Xhoan Daxos, who is described as pale in the books. Five months later, she celebrated

the fact that a white actor was cast to play Daario Naharis, despite a rumor claiming the network was looking to fill the role with someone of another ethnicity.

More recently, Antonsson wrote that the character of Corlys, portrayed by Steve Toussaint on "House of the Dragon," was miscast. "There are no Black Valyrians and there should not be any in the show," she said of the common ancestors of Velaryons and Targaryens.

Antonsson contends that upset fans are criticizing "cherry-picked statements stripped of context." She tells *Variety* that it bothers her to be "labeled a racist, when my focus has been solely on the world building." According to the author, she has no issue with inclusive cast-

Fans of George R.R. Martin are outraged by comments by longtime collaborators and threatening

to boycott their

upcoming book.

ing, but she strongly believes that "diversity should not trump story."

"If George had indeed made the Valyrians Black instead of white, as he mused on his 'Not a Blog' in 2013, and this new show proposed to make the Velaryons anything other than Black, we would have had the same issue with it and would have shared the same opinion," Antonsson says.

Inclusive casting in fantasy has become a hot-button issue recently, with Black actors in "The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power" and "Obi-Wan Kenobi" slammed with racist comments from online trolls. Toussaint recently noted that some fans who object to his playing a "rich Black guy" have no issue buying into the existence of dragons.

But Antonsson dismisses Toussaint's comments as a "false dichotomy which completely misses the point of how secondary world fantasy functions." Changing the ethnic makeup of characters "raises all sorts of logical questions," she contends.

Antonsson also takes issue with other deviations in the HBO series — as does García. But both say they have been "really enjoying" "House of the Dragon" and credit showrunner Ryan Condal as "someone who clearly cares about the source material."

As for Martin, who declined to speak with *Variety* for this story, Antonsson says he is "very much aware" of the arguments she and García have had online with fans. She adds that while Martin "doesn't see the point in engaging with people" on social media, "he has not suggested we should stop sharing our opinions."

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Plastic Sofa Covers? It's 'Elementary'

By Selome Hailu



Retro plastic couch covers are finally getting their due in 21stcentury pop culture.

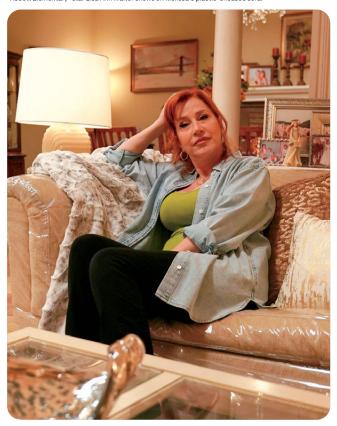
Beyond getting referenced on a Beyoncé album, the tacky-yet-lovable fabric shield appears in an upcoming episode of "Abbott Elementary," when Melissa (Lisa Ann Walter) invites Janine (Quinta Brunson) over for a cooking lesson. It's the show's first major look at Melissa's domestic life, and a large, welcoming sofa had to be the centerpiece for an Italian American household in South Philly.

"It's the first thing I asked for," Walter says about the couch cover, seen here in a first-look image that *Variety* can exclusively reveal. "Well, first I asked for plastic on the lampshades, but people might not understand that. An older-generation thing."

Set decorator Cherie Ledwith describes the sofa as a fab '80s couch with big rolled arms. The color is a neutral shade, "but we had to go for it and put that plastic on there. It says a lot."

The pillows add more texture and reflect Melissa's taste. Toward the end of the episode, titled "The Principal's Office," she drunkenly looks at framed photos and spills red wine on the couch ... thank God for that plastic. *\mathcal{O}\$

"Abbott Elementary" star Lisa Ann Walter shows off Melissa's plastic-encased sofa.



FIRST I ASKED FOR PLASTIC ON THE LAMPSHADES, BUT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT UNDERSTAND THAT." — LISA ANN WAITER

'The Mole' Burrows Back Into the U.S. TV Landscape

By Michael Schneider



Mention "The Mole" to virtually anyone who works in reality TV, and their eyes light up. For a show that hasn't been seen on U.S. television since 2008, it has nonetheless achieved near-mythical status.

"It combines a sense of adventure with a sort of 'Ocean's 11'/ 'Mission Impossible'-style caper," says Eureka Prods. CEO Chris Culvenor of the format. "People love a mystery. I think that is what was the appeal of the original."

In the competition, contestants win money that goes into a communal pot that the victor ultimately claims. But one of them is a mole trying to sabotage the game.

With the true-crime genre continuing to grow in popularity, Culvenor believes the time is right to reintroduce "The Mole" to the U.S., where it aired for five editions: two with Anderson Cooper as host from 2001-02, followed by celebrity editions in 2003 and 2004, and a brief return in 2008. Netflix execs quickly expressed interest in the revival after Eureka grabbed the rights from Belgium-based Primitives.

"It's a game of trust; you're not quite sure who's telling the truth and who's not," says Netflix unscripted series VP Nathaniel Grouille. "We live in that world now, where truth is harder to come by. So it's zeitgeisty."

Casting was key, especially for the person hired to play the "Mole." For host, Eureka turned to another TV journalist: MSNBC's Alex Wagner.

"The only thing that was more exhaustive for the hunt for the Mole's' host," Culvenor says. "We looked at everything from movie stars to people with that adventure background, but we came to Alex and her journalistic background because journalists are always on the hunt to get to the bottom of a story."

"The Mole" was shot in Australia, where Eureka maintains an office. "We wanted a location that would offer us a big city in one episode, a jungle in the other, a tropical island in the next, snowfields in another," says Culvenor.

Given the show's big reveal, "The Mole" was tricky for Netflix to schedule. The streamer will release five episodes on Oct. 7, followed by batches of additional episodes the following two weeks. Says Grouille: "Obviously you want to leave the audience something to play for at the end."

Joi Schweitzer, Greg Shapiro and Will Richardson are contestants on Netflix's revival of "The Mole."



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Buzz for 'White Noise' Is Muted but Why?

Noah Baumbach's latest film scored two major fest spots, yet surprisingly little heat surrounds it

By Clayton Davis



AWARDS CIRCUIT

"White Noise" has been a quieter Oscar hopeful: The Netflix film from Noah Baumbach, a two-time Oscar-nominated screenwriter whose most recent feature was nommed for best picture, boasts a cast that includes Adam Driver and a 92% score on Rotten Tomatoes. However, buzz is strangely muted for the first film to fill the opening-night slot of both the Venice and New York film festivals.

Baumbach's adaptation of Don DeLillo's postmodern novel revolves around Jack Gladney (Driver), a professor of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. He lives with his wife, Babette (Greta Gerwig), and their four children, but when an "Airborne Toxic Event" takes place in their community, the family must grapple with the universal mysteries of love and death.

The resulting film evokes Paul Thomas Anderson's "Inherent Vice" (2014), with touches of "National Lampoon's Vacation" (1983) and any Wes Anderson midcareer joint.

It features gorgeous set pieces from two-time Oscar-nominated production designer Jess Gonchor (2010's "True Grit" and 2016's "Hail, Caesar!") and Emmy-nominated set decorator Claire Kaufman ("American Horror Story"), alongside '80s-era threads by legendary costume designer Ann Roth, who is the oldest woman to win a competitive Oscar (for 2020's "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom").

It also boasts a lively and grandiose composition from four-time nominee Danny Elfman and an original song, "New Body Rhumba," from LCD Soundsystem; the tale features a fun and unexpected dance sequence that may go down with "You Make My Dreams" from "500 Days of Summer" (2009) and "Aquarius" from "The 40-Year-Old Virgin" (2005) as the most notable in recent memory.

During his introductory remarks at the NYFF screening at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall on Sept. 30, Baumbach joked about the book's "unfilmable" reputation. The writer-director is a longtime staple of the festival, with "White Noise" marking his eighth film there.

In his turn at the microphone, film festival artistic director Dennis Lim paid tribute to an auteur with an even longer NYFF résumé: Jean-Luc Godard, who died in September at the age of 91. More than 25 of his films screened at the festival, and his last one, "The Image Book" (2018), is playing for free on a loop schedule during the festival's first week.

Godard and Baumbach's long track records at the fest point to a potential problem that it has yet to address, which is a conNoah Baumbach's adaptation of "White Noise," starring Adam Driver and Greta Gerwig, screened last week at New York Film Festival. stant return to the same well of directors. As the Hollywood industry crawls — even perhaps is dragged — toward progress, one could argue that NYFF, and the overall state of film criticism, is not open enough to new, dynamic voices.

The renowned East Coast fest, which is celebrating its 60th anniversary, is going through an evolution as it looks to cement its place in the world of must-stops for Oscar hopefuls and ambitious filmmakers amid a leadership turnover; executive director Eugene Hernandez is departing to head the Sundance Film Festival. In his opening-night remarks, Lim said "White Noise" captures the spirit of the festival in this moment.

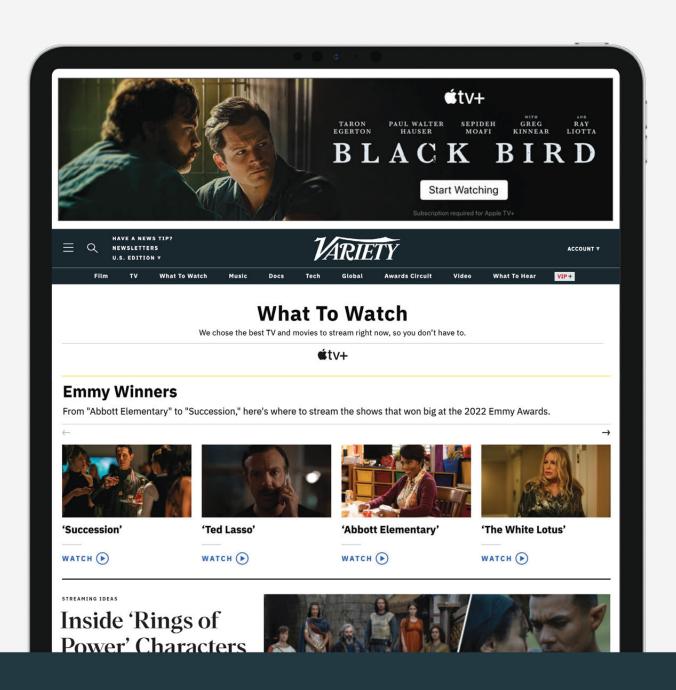
Netflix is still confident about the movie's awards prospects, and to be honest, it should be. Look for it to be embraced by the Golden Globes when they return in January, and with the adapted-screenplay prospective lineup looking light, Baumbach could find his way into the Oscar discussion.





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Variety's Power of Women L.A.

Wallis Annenberg Centerforthe Performing Arts, Beverly Hills

Variety's annual assembly of powerful women was headlined by cover stars Hillary and Chelsea Clinton, activist and Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai, actor Elizabeth Olsen and "Queen Sugar" partners Oprah Winfrey and Ava **DuVernay**. "It's a choice to be optimistic," Hillary Clinton told the crowd, adding that her late friend and predecessor as secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, was once asked if she was an optimist. "She said, 'Yes. I'm an optimist who worries a lot.' Let's be optimistic but take our worry and channel it into action." After saluting the 42 women directors behind "Queen Sugar," Winfrey closed the evening with wise words from the late Maya Angelou. "I told Maya that my school, which had just opened, was going to be my legacy. She said, 'Your legacy is never one thing. It's everything you touch.' Tonight I think of every life and story we touch," Winfrey proclaimed.





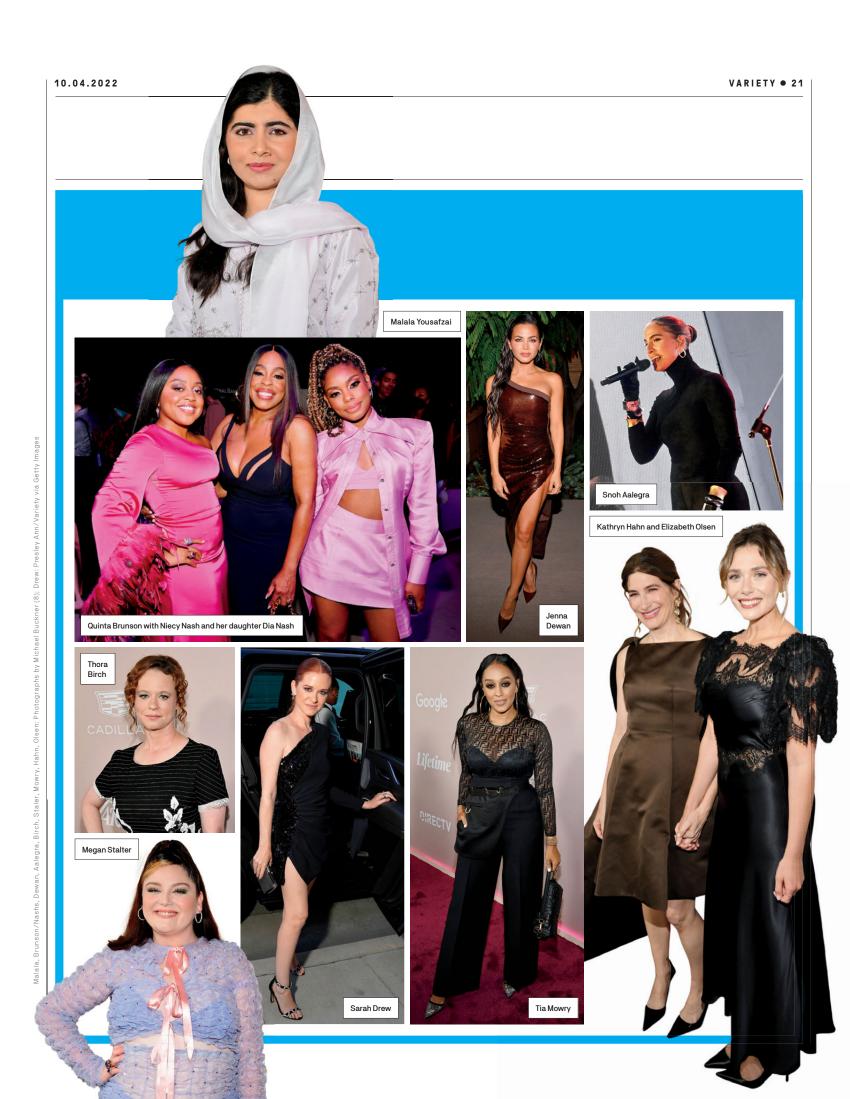












10.04.2022

Bette Midler

EXPOSURE

'The Good House' Premiere

The Robin Williams Center, New York City

Before Sigourney Weaver returns to the world of the Na'vi in "Avatar 2," she plays Hildy Good, an alcoholic dealing with long-buried emotions as she rekindles a romance with an old flame (Kevin Kline). "I just jumped at the chance to play an older woman in a story that was told from her point of view," Weaver told Variety. "Half the time she's speaking to the audience, saying, 'This is what's really going on. Can you believe what's happening in my life?' It was so refreshing, and it was so intimate.



'Mr. Harrigan's Phone' Special Screening Tudum Theater, Hollywood

For actor Jaeden Martell, facing off against Bill Skarsgård's frightening Pennywise in "It" was nothing compared with the anxiety he felt on the set of his second **Stephen King** adaptation, preparing for his first scene opposite **Donald** Sutherland. ``I had known Bill before, and he's very sweet,'' Martell told Variety."With the [Pennywise] makeup on, I was terrified — don't get me wrong. But there's something about Donald - he's the real deal." On Sutherland's last day on set, he shared some words of encouragement with his young co-star: "He called me into his trailer and was like, 'Don't stop



'Hocus Pocus 2' **Premiere**

AMC Lincoln Square 13, **New York**

Bette Midler, Sarah Jessica Parker and Kathy Najimy 's Sanderson sisters return to their witchy ways in $the \ long-awaited\ sequel.\ ''It \ wasn't\ anything\ that\ we\ expected-that\ 30\ years\ later\ we\ would\ still\ have\ the$ support of these great fans who know every line, and sing every song, and dress up better than we looked," Najimy told Variety, explaining that the original movie was a "slow starter" before TV airings transformed it into a cult classic. While making the 1993 movie, Parker would read The New York Times during lunch breaks while suspended on her broomstick; she said the "quite impressive" advancements in technology made that impractical this time around. "You don't tend to rest on the broom — or in my case, a Swiffer," she quipped.





Matthew Broderick and Sarah Jessica Parker with daughters Marion Loretta Elwell Broderick, second from left, and Tabitha Hodge Broderick



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SEIZING THE RINGS

ONE DOWN, FOUR TO GO:

JENNIFER SALKE BANKS

ON FIVE SEASONS OF MYTH AND

SPECTACLE TO BUILD AMAZON

STUDIOS INTO A GLOBAL LEADER

BY CYNTHIA LITTLETON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ART STREIBER



(Previous spread) Makeup: Joanna Wood; Hair: Liz Sustaita; Dress: Burberry

JENNIFER SALKE entered the Second

Age in London. ¶ The head of Amazon Studios spent the 72 hours leading up to the launch of "The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power" in a whirlwind, traveling from the series' global premiere event in London's Leicester Square to her Manhattan apartment to watch the early returns arrive via reports from Amazon's formidable consumer research department. The "Rings" team was exhausted, having had no chance to recover from the grueling worldwide promotional campaign for the Amazon Prime Video series that is an enormous bet for the tech giant, being the most expensive television series ever produced. For most of launch day, Sept. 1, Salke and key members of her executive team, many members of the large ensemble cast and executive producers J.D. Payne, Patrick McKay and Lindsey Weber gathered together for hours in virtual "war rooms," bone tired but energized, to wait for the world's reaction. ¶ "There was just this adrenalized excitement that, after four and a half years, we were actually letting

people see the show," Salke says. "It really was a holding of hands across the company."

Salke also kept her eye that night on the numerous war rooms filled with technicians and engineers set up in London, New York, Seattle and sites in India to ensure that the Prime Video streaming had no performance issues as it dealt with what it hoped would be a worldwide deluge of traffic. The last thing Amazon wanted to see when the launch cycle began, was screeching on social media from "LOTR" fans that the platform had crashed. Salke's nerves were soothed, though, as she saw photos and videos flying around Amazon's internal messaging channels with scenes of parties and Champagne corks popping as the war rooms monitored the surge that most certainly did come.

"They were up all night long," Salke says. "Pictures were being sent around to everybody. It was just a very culturally defining moment for the global company."

For Salke, it's one season down, four to go. The successful maiden voyage of "Rings of Power," which focuses on stories from the Second Age period of the beloved "LOTR" mythos from author J.R.R. Tolkien, is off to an impressive start. But Amazon Studios is

playing the long game with its Tolkien investment. The company committed to an unprecedented five seasons (or 50 hours) of production as part of the jaw-dropping \$250 million rights deal struck with the Tolkien estate in November 2017. That came about three months before Salke left her role as president of NBC Entertainment to take the reins of Amazon Studios. She inherited the Elendil-sized task of shepherding the series from idea to fruition.

It was a mission that tapped all the skills she's honed over the years as a top creative executive at Aaron Spelling Prods. and 20th Century Fox Television, and as an instrumental player in the turnaround at NBC a decade ago.

For these achievements, Salke and Amazon Studios have been named the 2022 recipient of the *Variety* Vanguard Award, recognizing contributions to the global television industry and presented by *Variety* and Mipcom. Salke will be honored on Oct. 18 as part of the annual Mipcom content market and conference that runs Oct. 17-20 in Cannes.

Part of Salke's tough assignment with "Rings of Power" comes with enormous scrutiny on the project from "LOTR" devotees around the world, including one close



to home for Amazonians. It's no secret that Jeff Bezos, founder and executive chairman of Amazon, is a longtime lover of tales of Middle-earth. With the "Rings" rendition delivered by her team, in addition to the massive growth of Amazon Studios operations since her arrival, Salke has proven herself in the eyes of Amazon's top boss. "Jen is an inspiring leader who's built an amazing team and transformed Amazon Studios and Prime Video into a marquee destination for talent, creators and elevated storytelling," Bezos tells Variety. "Her willingness to take big swings is matched by her good judgment and creative taste. She has just the right kind of thoughtful fearlessness."

Friends and colleagues of Salke say



she demonstrated natural leadership early on. Dana Walden, chairman of Disney General Entertainment Content, was a mentor to Salke when they worked together at 20th Century Fox Television in the 2010s. In $Walden's\,view, Salke\,has\,the\,combination\,of$ charisma, managerial skills and artistic instincts that are needed to work effectively with the creative community and within a giant corporation such as Amazon. "One of the things that makes her so special as an executive is that she is so creative herself. She's funny. I have never laughed harder than at some of the times I've spent with Jen," Walden says. "She has a unique ability to hear an idea that has the potential to be explosive that others don't hear, and I think it's because she connects with creators in a very authentic way."

Nicole Kidman, who earned an Oscar

nomination this year for playing Lucille Ball in Amazon Studios' 2021 biopic "Being the Ricardos," is effusive about the executive she calls "one of the great female leaders" in the industry. "I'll do anything for that woman," Kidman says. "She is deeply kind, loyal, talented — and a treasure."

Another star who recently scored in the kudos derby with Amazon Studios is the multi-hyphenate music maven Lizzo, whose unscripted series "Watch Out for the Big Grrrls" was an upset winner last month in the Emmy Awards' tough reality competition series category. Lizzo and her dance troupe were fierce enough to snap the four-year winning streak of "RuPaul's Drag Race." "When I pitched the concept of 'Watch Out for the Big Grrrls' — where we could champion and celebrate women who are often overlooked — [Amazon Studios was] behind

"IT REALLY WAS A HOLDING OF HANDS ACROSS THE COMPANY."

- JENNIFER SALKE





FAIR FIGHTER: Amazon casts Galadriel in a new light in "The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power."

the idea immediately and supported my vision every step of the way," Lizzo says. "Jen's decision to empower storytellers is what sets her and the team apart."

As her career has taken her into senior management roles, Salke has done a deft job of managing creative teams at a high level and at the same time staying close to the final product. "She's very hands-on in the details of these big shows, and it's the details that make these things work," says Tony Vinciquerra, chairman-CEO of Sony Pictures Entertainment. Sony TV co-produces one of Prime Video's biggest series, the sardonic superhero romp "The Boys," with Amazon Studios. The executives also worked together at Fox. "She genuinely gets excited about her shows, and that's not always the case with executives," Vinciquerra says. "She does everything she can to get behind them and make them work, which we love to see."

The timing of all of this is good news. The most recent season of "The Boys" set viewership records and laid a nice path for "Rings of Power" to follow, which is fortuitous for Salke. As she approaches her fifth anniversary at Amazon, the company is at long last finalizing its plan for the integration of MGM within Amazon's content operation. It's been a parlor guessing game in Hollywood as to who would oversee what in the new world order. Amazon insiders have long said that the smart money was on Salke to be rewarded with oversight of MGM's film and TV production activity for transforming Amazon Studios. Nothing's official yet — Big Amazon famously takes its sweet time settling on big-picture operational decisions -but the expectation is that MGM will operate as an autonomous label under the Amazon Studios umbrella, reporting to Salke.

As "Rings of Power" cruises to its Oct. 14 finale, Salke sat for a wide-ranging Q&A late last month at Amazon Studios' newly renovated office complex in Culver City, which incorporates the hallowed ground of the David O. Selznick Studios Southern Gothic mansion, just down the road from what was once MGM and is now Sony Pictures Entertainment. The discussion goes deep into the behind-the-scenes business story of birthing a new chapter of Tolkien, what it's like to manage creative people in crazy times and the work Team Salke has put in to make Amazon Studios much more than a rounding error for its e-commerce giant.

You walked in the door of Amazon Studios in 2018 with a huge assignment: Get a new iteration of "Lord of the Rings" off the ground. Where did you start?

The essence of the project was clear from the moment I got here, because it emanated from Jeff Bezos and the whole company. They rallied behind making this extraordinary rights deal that was also very groundbreaking for us as a company and in the industry. Bezos is a huge fan of Tolkien and has a great knowledge of the lore. The whole idea of why we got the rights to begin with was to tell the story of good versus evil — of people coming together from all different worlds to fight evil, really. That was really the essence and the heartbeat of the whole thing. And that's why it resonates with people — that's why showrunners J.D. Payne and Patrick McKay's vision has resonated. Season 1 is really doing the hard work of setting up who all those characters are, what are the worlds and how are they going to "JEFF BEZOS
LOVES
THIS SHOW
AND THIS
WHOLE
ENDEAVOR
AS MUCH AS
ANYBODY
POSSIBLY
COULD."

- JENNIFER SALKE

come together to fight the ultimate evil to save the world. I mean, what could be more resonant than that?

"Rings of Power" uses Tolkien's work as a foundation, but there's a lot of material that's not from the "LOTR" canon. How did you set the tone for that material?

There's so much darkness in the world. Leaning into light was the other thing that was really appealing to everybody - bringing something to our global customer base that is hopeful and has light and that a family can watch. So many people have grown up with this literature, and we wanted this series to pay it forward for new generations of Tolkien lovers. The line we've been using is "If you're old enough to read the books, you're old enough to watch the show." We knew from the beginning that this was not our "Game of Thrones." In fact, the fans spoke up from the minute the deal was closed, saying, "Please don't try to insert sex and a level of provocative violence," things that don't feel true to the stories that Tolkien wanted to tell.

How was the Tolkien estate to work with? The rights to this property have been so carved up. Was that tricky at all for you?

Simon Tolkien, the author's grandson,

turned out to be such a collaborator of ours, and a friend. He's a wonderful guy and an author in his own right. And he's sort of the designated liaison for this deal with Amazon. There were very clear guidelines around that participation, and he really became such a good sounding board and partner.

What sort of guidance did he give you? What was on his wish list?

It wasn't that specific; it was more about advising around different pathways of rights that might have challenges to them. Because there are very clear delineations there. But the estate was very open and encouraging for reinvention, but always in ways that stay true to Tolkien. We all have the same kind of vision for this property. There was never any disconnect there, which is probably why it worked out so well.

Much has been made of the \$450 million price tag for production. Is that number accurate? Did the sheer amount of investment going in make this even more daunting?

We're building infrastructure for five seasons. We're building a small city. We were always going to spend what we needed to spend to get it right. I'm fortunate to be working at this company where we want to be financially disciplined, but nobody wanted to compromise on what this would be visually. I think it was all money really well spent. If you look at how people are reacting to the visual experience of the show, that's been overwhelmingly positive.

What is your target for a Season 2 premiere date?

The production team is working on Season 2 now. We're going to get that out into the world as soon as we can.

Will it be out in 2023?

We want the shortest time possible between seasons, but we want to keep the bar just as high. So it'll take what it takes. But there's been some urgency around moving quickly, which is why these guys have been writing all through their hiatus. We're moving fast.

What was Jeff Bezos' review of Season 1?

Jeff Bezos loves this show and this whole endeavor as much as anybody possibly could. I've talked to him a lot about it. He loves the show, and I can tell he's proud of it. And he respects the integrity of what we're setting up and

the intelligence and thoughtfulness behind it. And, of course, we hope that more and more people come to it, because it's five seasons of storytelling.

One month in, how do you feel about the performance so far?

We're cresting toward 100 million customers having watched it so ... It's a big number. We can't wait to get more info on how the audience all breaks down. We really anticipate,



FLAWED GOD: Amazon's "The Boys" is a quirky take on the superhero genre.

with these last three episodes, a huge turnout, because it's all coming together and curiosity is at a fever pitch. And these last few episodes are the strongest in the season, because they're not just about the setup. They're excellent.

It's been almost seven months since Amazon closed its \$8.5 billion acquisition of MGM. Do you have clarity on how Amazon Studios and MGM will coexist?

You're going to see us investing, as a company, even more in film. You'll see more investment and more expansive opportunities for film. You'll see more fluidity between theatrical and streaming options for films. And then there's a TV team that's still working on great shows that exist outside our company. And we're looking forward to more collaboration as time goes on.

Will Amazon Studios continue to make movies for theatrical release?

Yes, we will. With all the IP and our growing strategy around film, there's going to be more opportunity.

Even with all the volatility in the stock market, Amazon's market cap is still

more than \$1 trillion. Do box office receipts matter to your film business?

It definitely matters. Our goal is to make some big films that will have value across the spectrum in theatrical and then to streaming. The goal is to make hit movies. We all know that's not easy. As we build out the larger businesses around us and all the things we're doing in ad-supported streaming, we're just thinking about more options for customers. Nothing rings the bell louder than big origi-

nals that are global. So you're going to see us invest more on the film side and the television side

Give me an example of a show that only Amazon Studios would make.

"Lizzo's Watch Out for the Big Grrrls." During COVID, we went to a [Zoom] meeting with her. She got on and she just — she's so Lizzo. She talked about her upbringing and breaking into the business. She's like, "When I go in to cast my backup dancers, there's nowhere to call. I have to find these people myself." She told us she wanted to

sign her own agency called Big Grrrls to cultivate talent, and she wanted to do a reality show where some [contestants] become her backup singers. I said, "We're done. We're doing that." And so we just moved forward, and it was just the most joyful experience.

Amazon Studios has seen its staff grow by more than 50%, to about 1,500 employees, since you signed on. The studio's output has had a similar growth curve. What's been the biggest challenge of managing that kind of growth?

What you'll notice with us is that we're going to try to not do everything. We're going to try to do some things really well, as far as acquiring new audiences, and then evolve from there. Every decision we make is associated with a goal; it's not like I just go, "OK, let's greenlight that." We look at whatever data we have to support — if you spend X amount on that, we expect to accomplish A, Band C. We are constantly looking at [Prime Video's] overall trajectory of how are we engaging with customers. This is not like when I got here, and the mandate was to "surprise and delight" 200 million Prime members. We're a responsible business unit. And we just try things we believe in. The only thing we know for sure is that hits are elusive and data's imperfect. If you don't take risks, you will definitely not be right a lot of the time. So we are a company that works hard not to be risk-averse. ●

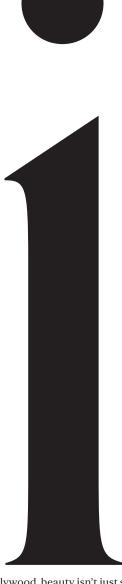




Like young Russell Crowe and Brad Pitt before him, Harris Dickinson, who blew audiences away at Cannes in 'Triangle of Sadness,' is not just another very pretty face

> Story by Manori Ravindran

Photograph by Victoria Stevens



In Hollywood, beauty isn't just skin deep—it's a currency. So it's striking that Harris Dickinson makes fun of his own bountiful good looks in Ruben Östlund's satirical comedy "Triangle of Sadness," in which he plays a spoiled male model who goes on a humbling journey. In person, Dickinson cuts a striking figure at 6'2", with sculpted features and full, cherry lips. But ask this 26-year-old from a working-class, South London family about his own physicality, and he instantly recoils. It's easy to understand why: to objectify him for his beauty alone is to miss him entirely.

Dickinson is increasingly everywhere — not only in British cinema but also in an impressive number of Hollywood features. His may not be an overnight success, but his popularity has been simmering, and will soon boil over into stardom. In four years, he's had leading roles in indie hits like Joanna Hogg's meta romance "The Souvenir II" and studio fare like Sony's psychological murder mystery "Where the Crawdads Sing."

In "Triangle of Sadness," he plays Carl, a Gen-Zer hustling for work while quietly raging against the frivolity of unchecked capitalism. In the film's opening scene,



he struts up and down, bare-chested, for an audition in which he's asked to lower his "triangle of sadness" — the middle bit between his eyebrows. But in the pic's rollicking third act Dickinson steals the show, when Carl, who has booked passage on a yacht for the ultrarich, engages in a steamy liaison in a lifeboat with a toilet manager named Abigail, played by veteran Filipina actor Dolly De Leon.

"Even after the screening of 'Triangle' in Cannes," he says, "I can see it in people's eyes: They see me and Carl as the same person." That is, heart-racingly — maybe even painfully — hot. He adds, with a hint of disapproval, "Even people I made the film with."

IT'S JULY IN LONDON, and above 100 degrees outside. The government has urged people to stay home, but the actor has shown up at the Ham Yard Hotel anyway, which is normally bustling with media types but is eerily empty. Seated at a table in the corner, he's straightforward, friendly and confident, with the grace of a cat and a sudden, dazzling smile. And yet he keeps a polite, professional distance. He's so serious and thoughtful, in fact, that it's surprising when he says that he's "very silly as a person," without "any reservations" about humiliating himself.

Dickinson showed his silly side to "Triangle of Sadness" director Östlund, who more than once turned his camera away from the main action of a scene to catch the actor's hilarious antics. "There's a real freedom in being involved in a comedy," Dickinson says. "You can lean into the silliness of who we are as people."

He feels the same way—almost nonchalant—about sex scenes. When asked if he had an intimacy coordinator for his breakout movie, Eliza Hittman's "Beach Rats,"





MODEL CITIZENS The late Charlbi Dean and Harris Dickinson in "Triangle of Sadness"

he says, "No, no, we didn't," and laughs. In general, he says, nudity on jobs "just feels like an extension of being human."

In "Triangle," many of Dickinson's best scenes are opposite Charlbi Dean, who played his girlfriend, Yaya, in the film. But the South African actor died suddenly in August, after a short illness, just two weeks before the movie's scheduled premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, throwing the screening into doubt. Dickinson, though, was there for his fellow actors.

"I definitely had some trepidation," he says about going to the premiere. "It didn't feel like the right time to be at a film festival."

But De Leon says Dickinson's presence in Toronto, where he threw a protective arm around her onstage during Östlund's emotional introduction of the film, "really mattered"

"I told him, 'If you're not going to go, I'm not going to go. I need you there,'" says De Leon. She adds, "He's wise for a man his age." "There's a real freedom in being involved in a comedy. You can lean into the silliness of who we are as people."

— Harris Dickinson

GRAHAM BRYAN, a drama instructor at RAW Academy, met Dickinson when the actor was 12 years old and enrolled in summer school sessions at the East London performing arts school in Walthamstow, where he grew up. Those quickly became weekly sessions in which Dickinson learned improv, Method acting and what's become the crucible for many British actors with an eye on Hollywood — dialects.

"He's got an amazing ear, and he will work any accent," says Bryan. "By the time he left us, he'd completely mastered about 10 different dialects. That's probably gone up to 20 now. He just never stops."

Yet when Dickinson, one of four children, whose parents worked as a social worker and a hairdresser, graduated from the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts and began auditioning, he struggled to find work he was interested in. "There were a lot of upper-class or royal roles," he says, "and I felt like I was always searching for other stuff."

He eventually found what he was looking for in 2017's "Beach Rats," a film about a teen struggling with his queerness amid a group of hypermasculine peers. The movie's working-class Brooklyn setting seemed familiar to him. "It felt like something so far from where I grew up but also quite close as well," he says.

De Leon says of Dickinson, "I don't think he can ever play a part and pretend. Some of acting is pretending, but I think acting is just being, and Harris is really good at that. That's his strength as an actor: He's not thinking ahead about what to do or say or how to act — he's just there."

Dickinson is trying to be more present in real life too. He raises his eyebrows and exhales when asked about the Cannes premiere, where even friends approached him as if he were someone he wasn't.

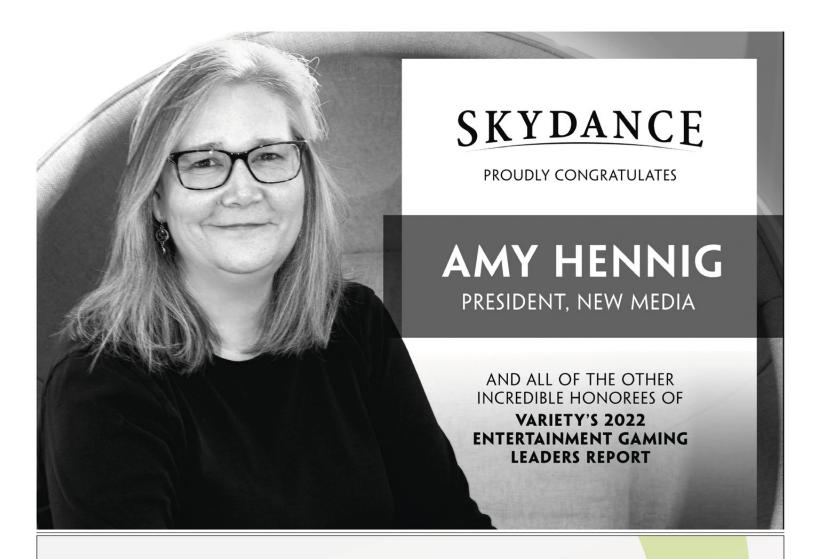
"Inormally go a bit numb at those things," he says, "and I don't cope very well with that kind of stimuli. But I'm trying to shift my perspective and be like, 'People loved it. This is great."

And being an actor so convincing that even your friends forget who you really are is not the worst thing in the world.

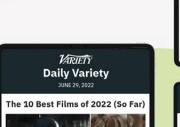
Unsurprisingly, Dickinson recently assumed such a convincing North Carolina accent for "Where the Crawdads Sing," in which he plays the smooth but morally bankrupt love interest Chase Andrews, that executive producer Reese Witherspoon was "a bit confused," Dickinson says, by his real British accent.

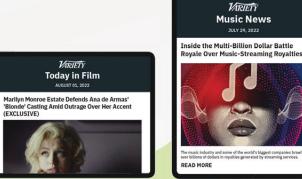
"Daisy Edgar-Jones and I used to joke about it," he says of his fellow Brit actor, who stars as Kya Clark in the film. "There were days when we were in the marsh, doing these Southern accents, and we'd both stop and be like, 'How have we ended up here?' Because these were such American roles, from such a specific region too.'

"It's slightly mad at times," says Dickinson, flashing one of those dazzling smiles. "But I guess we fooled 'em." ●



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Domee Shi Pulls Inspiration From Her Past

Variety's Creative Impact in Animation honoree forges her own path at Pixar ● By Andrew Barker











"Turning Red,"
Domee Shi's
feature debut,
is the first Pixar
feature directed
solely by a



"A Chinese Canadian tween undergoes magical puberty and turns into a giant red panda."

As far as elevator pitches go, it's not exactly "Jaws' in space" or "snakes on a plane." But that highly specific logline is the one that Domee Shi used to persuade Pixar to greenlight her feature directorial debut, some half a decade ago when the then-20-something was a budding storyboard artist on the studio's Emeryville campus.

Shi's film, "Turning Red," delivers on every bit of that premise, focusing on a confidently nerdy Toronto girl named Mei and her loving yet strict mother, Ming, whose perfectly ordered lives are thrust into chaos by Mei's sudden transformation. The film was released last spring, and immediately notched a number of milestones for the studio: the first Pixar feature solely directed by a woman, the first Pixar feature with all-female creative leads, and only the second Pixar feature directed by a person of Asian descent. But the particulars of Shi's identity aside, it also represented the emergence of a singular new voice within the celebrated studio, and everything from its cultural specificity, to its animation style — impressionistic, frantically paced, anime-influenced - to its openness in addressing the messiness of early adolescence (from menstruation and mother issues to the suggestion that a tween girl's love of a particular boy band might have some extra-musical motivations) felt both of a piece with the Pixar tradition and something invigoratingly new.

"From the beginning, we were going to be touching on all the awkward, cringey, embarrassing moments of tweenhood in this movie," says the 33-year-old Shi, who is receiving Variety's Creative Impact in Animation Award on Oct. 6. "That was the initial pitch, that's what we all signed up for, and so I think we just committed to that. What I love about Pixar is that we take a lot of creative risks. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't, but that's what makes our films so unique."

Indeed, as left-field as it reads on paper, Mei's panda metamorphosis serves as a perfect metaphor for the hormonal ravages of puberty, in which a child suddenly wakes up to find a bigger, smellier, hairier, more emotionally volatile version of herself that she scarcely recognizes in the mirror. Shi was particularly heartened by the responses the film has drawn from women and Asian communities, in particular, although there were a few loud voices on the internet who found some of its themes too mature for a Pixar audience.

"Iwas surprised at how shocked everyone was that we were gonna talk about periods and show pads," she remembers. "We realized that maybe we were in our own protected bubble up here at Pixar, where we all kind of speak the same language and we all embrace the weird awkward parts of life. But then when you show it to the world you realize, 'oh yeah, the rest of the world isn't here.' And that's OK. That's why we make movies like this. To

touch on these subjects and normalize them a little bit more."

Born in Chongquing, China, and raised mostly in Toronto, Shi grew up "watching just as much anime and Miyazaki as I did Disney and Pixar," drawing and writing stories from a young age. She first exhibited her drawings as fan art on online Harry Potter fan communities, and branched out into homemade animation. After studying at Sheridan College, she landed at Pixar's internship program, and soon found herself working as a story artist on "Inside Out," then as a storyboard artist for "The Good Dinosaur" and "Incredibles 2." Meanwhile she was developing her own dialogue-free short, "Bao," which traces an older woman's complicated relationship with an anthropomorphic dumpling in ways that presaged a number of "Turning Red's" key maternal themes. The short, Shi's first, won her an Oscar, and by then "Turning Red" was well underway.

Like Pixar's "Soul" and "Luca" before it, "Turning Red" was ini-

Turning Red,"
Domee Shi's
feature debut,
centers on a
13-year-old
Toronto girl
whose "magical
puberty" casues
her to transform
into a red panda.

46

I was surprised at how shocked everyone was that we were gonna talk about periods and show pads." — Domee Shi

tially slated for a theatrical release, but wound up going straight to Disney+ as the business inched back toward normality after COVID lockdowns. Shi admits to some complicated feelings about the release.

"As a film nerd I was definitely disappointed at first. I was like, 'man, no one's gonna see the highres texture on Mei's sweater!"" she says with a laugh. "But then I paused and thought, 'you know, sweater texture is really not why people want to watch movies.' But with how the pandemic redefined everything, our priorities did shift to how we can get this movie seen by as many people as possible, as safely as possible. And after the movie came out, meeting fans at events, a lot of fans thanked us for releasing it on Disney+, because that was the only way they would've been able to watch it. And that led to me thinking about how I developed my own relationship with animation, and how it wasn't through

the theater. It was through VHS tapes. The very first movie my family owned was 'Aladdin'; my dad bought it for me on VHS and I watched it over and over again. I could pause it, rewind it, watch my favorite parts over and over. It's almost a more intimate relationship with the viewer."

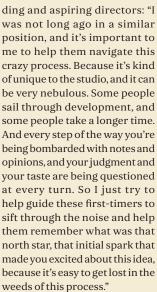
Shi does hasten to add that, notwithstanding the studio's first episodic series, "Win or Lose," premiering next year, Pixar is still very much in the business of theatrical features. And she would know, having been promoted to creative vice president of the studio last spring, where she now works alongside mentor Pete Docter, Peter Sohn and Dan Scanlon in mapping out the studio's slate.

"I'm still kind of figuring out my new role — I think I said 'yes' to it without fully knowing what it entailed," she says. But one element of the job she takes extremely seriously is her role as a mentor to the studio's bud-



Domee Shi's paying it forward by mentoring newbies at Pixar.

Domee Shi won an Oscar for her short "Bao," which marked her first directorial effort for the studio.



So how did Shi navigate Pixar's famously intense creative process, which yielded no fewer than eight different provisional versions of "Turning Red," as a first-timer? She credits a close-knit creative team, especially production designer Rona Liu (who also worked with Shi on "Bao"), for helping her synthesize influences ranging from "Sailor Moon" and "Ranma½" to Edgar Wright films to forge "Turning

Red's" distinctive aesthetic and vibe. She also credits Docter, who helped mold the film's emotional core ("my own personality is a little more reserved...and Pete is just so good at those moments in his own movies"). And then, of course, there was the fact that the film was such a personal one. Shi's very first sketch for "Turning Red" — in which a sweaty, overloaded young girl "stomps off to school" while her perfectly poised mother observes from the background — was based on Shi's memories of her own adolescence, and she acknowledges a sense that "instead of going to therapy, I made a feature film." She certainly wouldn't be the first writer-director to do that, and she adds that the experience of making the film, and showing it to her mother, has helped to jumpstart plenty of overdue conversations.

"It wasn't the whole Hollywood-style scene where after the premiere she turns to me with tears in her eyes and we hug and she says, 'I love you and I'm proud of you," Shi says of her mother's response. "But I felt that, for sure. Because we never even talked about this sort of stuff, so I do feel like making the movie maybe started that baby step of a conversation of us unpacking our own relationship. I wish it didn't have to take a whole animated feature film and \$200 million dollars, but I think we're definitely closer."

However quickly her role at the studio may have changed, Shi is still an animator first and foremost, and she's already back in development on her directorial follow-up. As one might imagine, she can't spill too many details about it yet, except to say that she's "doing research ... on You-Tube ... watching various clips ... of cool stuff" The one thing she will divulge, however, is that her next feature will not be another purgative exploration of mother-teenager tensions within immigrant communities.

"Idefinitely feel like I got it out of my system," she says with a small laugh. "A short and a feature film: I'm good. I have closed the book on that aspect of my psyche." •



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Nickelodeon Brings in the Network Cavalry

Paramount's various subsidiaries add programming width to kiddie channels • By Andrew Barker



Nickelodeon's popular "Paw Patrol" is headed for the big screen again in another feature-length film.

Ramsey Naito has been running Nickelodeon Animation since 2017, and in that time the programming for the flagship children's network has exploded with a raft of both homegrown series and adaptations of external IP. "Star Trek," "SpongeBob," "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles," "Blue's Clues," "Dora the Explorer," "Rugrats"... if that seems like too much for one network to handle, well, it no longer has to.

Last fall, Naito added running Paramount Animation to her docket, and since then, the scope of potential programming across the corporate-partnered Nickelodeon networks, Paramount+ and Paramount theatrical has given the network increased space to expand. "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem" — the Seth Rogen-produced feature spun off from Nick's revamped "Turtles" animated series — is due out next summer. Feature films

from "Paw Patrol," "Blue's Clues," and "Dora the Explorer" are also on the horizon, as well as new features from Paramount properties "Transformers" and "Smurfs."

For Naito, this glut of programming presents opportunities.

"It's a huge job, and I definitely feel the power of being stronger together than apart," Naito says of her increased purview. "Together, Nick Animation and Paramount Animation can make series, theatrical films, and be a destination for artists who can have long careers here. We're making so much content, and the ecosystem we have within our studios is huge. Artists can come here to work on a preschool show, a big kids show, a theatrical film, you name it, and have a rich career.

"We needed to operate as one team, and so that's been a main focus, just looking at both companies holistically. Nick already has some of the greatest IP, and Paramount has an incredible slate. And I really think bringing the Nick culture into the Paramount Animation space is really inspiring for everyone. It's artist-driven, it's creative, it's a destination for talent who want to tell stories that mean something."

Perhaps there's no better test case to point to in that regard than the impending launch of "Monster High." Adapted from Mattel's toy line, the property will get its introduction later this month, both as an animated Nickelodeon series and as a live-action musical feature film, which will unspool on both Nick and Paramount+. For Naito, this unusual launch strategy presented a way to "eventize" the series through multiple platforms.

"What's really wonderful about the movie is that it's a big event: it's fun, it has incredible visuals, and being live-action, it makes audiences believe that the characters they're seeing in the animated show are real," she says. "And that's truly aspirational and fun—it's an experience to watch these unreal characters in the live-action space, and that's what inspired the animated series. Together, they embolden each other."

Of course, in addition to adapting massive IP for the network -Nick's "Star Trek: Prodigy" will unveil its second season later this fall — and continuing to produce legacy originals including "Rugrats," "Loud House" and multiple "SpongeBob" series, Nick still has the matter of making space for fresh ideas. Next year, the network will debut series "Maximum Midnight," "Bossy Bear" and "Rock, Paper, Scissors" - the latter being the first to get the greenlight out of Nick's Intergalactic Shorts program, which was established to scout out pitches from underrepresented talent.

"We're making so much content based on known IP, and in a world where franchise is everything, it's especially important to be committed to making originals," Naito says. "And the same touchstones apply [for originals and franchises]. What's the talent that has a vision for the characters and the storytelling? Because the originals are the heart and soul; it's what keeps us relevant, and continues to expand the library and the business for years to come. We're very focused on doing both.

"And what's great is that we're in control of all of our programming, which means we can strategize how to release all of our shows. We're not just a linear channel anymore. Streaming, Paramount+, multiple networks, digital, social, theatrical films — there are so many mouths to feed."

Drawing the Future

Variety's 10 Animators to Watch will be feted Oct. 6 with a cocktail pour at Nickelodeon Animation Studio



JOE BENNETT
"Scavengers"

Many of Bennett's animated shorts capture a twisted take on humanity. There's a definite touch of Mike Judge's dark comedy, but also a poignancy and often a melancholy — Bennett cites John Cassavetes and documentary filmmaker Sean Dunne as influences.

"I'm creating something raw and natural," says Bennett, a Georgia native, who studied painting at the School of Visual Arts in New York before realizing he was more excited by animation.

Amidst those shorts, "Scavengers" stands defiantly apart: created with Charles Huettner, it's a silent piece about humans trying to survive in an alien world, yet its tone is softer and sweeter than his earthbound works. "I'm not into sci-fi but I watch a lot of animal documentaries and loved the challenge of telling a story without dialogue," Bennett says.

Now the duo is creating a series based on the short for HBO Max. He did have to make some compromises. "They said 'absolutely not' to the idea of a whole season without dialogue," he says.

Also in the works is another swerve, "Common Side Effects' (for Adult Swim), co-created with Steve Hely, who previously worked on "Veep." (The show is to be executive produced by Judge and Greg Daniels.) It features characters working for Big Pharma and others looking to help the world more naturally (think mushrooms); Bennett says it's closer in tone to "The Big Lebowski" or shows such as "Succession" and "White Lotus" that poke fun at corporate America and greed. "I'm trying not to fall into specific genres," he says.

— Stuart Miller



ARTHUR FONG

"Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem"

As art director of the upcoming "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem," Fong recognizes that he's inheriting a big responsibility to pay homage to the comic books, and later, cartoons that consumed him as child. "Every time I have to make a decision on design, I have to ask myself who's in the driver seat — the experienced, technical, artistic Arthur, or 3-year-old Arthur in TMNT pajamas with Leo and Stockman figurines in my hand," Fong says.

But as he pretends he is 3 years old with the ability to design like the 34-year-old he is, Fong carries with him the pedigree of animated projects including "Sausage Party" and "The Mitchells vs. the Machines," with elements at least as transgressive as "TMNT" creators Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird's irreverent source material. "I have a strange taste for what I find amusing, and it's not

always for everyone. But I think what I'm really after is the thrill of a challenge."

Currently moonlighting on a development project at Sony Pictures Animation, Fong plans to transition onto directing it full time after "Mutant Mayhem." Meanwhile, it's his work as production designer on the 2021 Netflix film "Wish Dragon" that both satisfied his creative needs and instilled a greater purpose beyond filmmaking. "As an Asian American, I don't often see Asian stories or heroes represented in a way that feels honest to me," Fong says. "I hope to continue to put myself in a position where my work, creative abilities and whatever small power I have is used for something more than me."

— Todd Gilchrist

I think the most interesting thing we can do is tell stories that are engaging and interesting." — Juston Gordon-Montgomery



SHEA FONTANA
"Monster High"

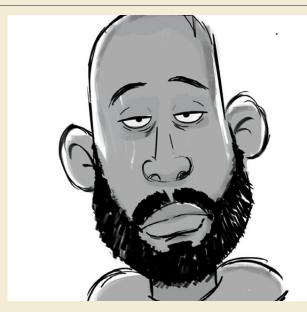
"Success in storytelling is when honesty comes in a very funny, very silly, very entertaining package," says Fontana, showrunner and co-executive producer of "Monster High," the upcoming animated series based on Mattel's fashion doll line of the same name. "I hope some of the themes sink in, maybe a story gives someone a little reassurance or plants a new idea, but I'm also perfectly happy if all I accomplish is entertaining someone for 11 minutes."

Growing up in "the middle of nowhere Utah," Fontana was drawn to animation as a career because as a kid she really connected to cartoons. "I thought of cartoon characters as my friends," Fontana says. "Cartoons made me feel less alone, and shaped my sensibilities in a lot of ways." It's that same vulnerability that shapes her approach to "Monster High," which places a low priority

on teaching strict lessons, while searching for anything that feels real and meaningful as a story. "Our stories don't distill down to 'this is right, this is wrong,' If anything, it's 'you're not alone,' 'you're valid' and 'you're OK.'

"That all gets filtered through my sensibility and comes out as goofy fun that hopefully appeals to kids," she adds.

Following her work on "Polly Pocket," and prior to that, "DC Super Hero Girls," Fontana has developed a real aptitude for bringing established characters into today's world while retaining the essence of their original appeal. But she demurs when asked about loftier goals with her work: "The height of my creative ambition might just be finding how many new ways we can make Headmistress Bloodgood's head fall off." — Todd Gilchrist



JUSTON GORDON-MONTGOMERY

"Invincible Fight Girl"

Prior to creating the upcoming Cartoon Network/HBO Max series "Invincible Fight Girl," Gordon-Montgomery accomplished much as an animator in a short amount of time, transitioning from storyboard artist on projects including "Smurfs: The Lost Village" and "Smallfoot" to writer and director on "DC Super Hero Girls." "My experience working in all facets of animation has allowed me to have a nuanced understanding of the hard work that goes into every stage of a production," Gordon-Montgomery says. "Having that understanding is key when working with a team and helping to facilitate the best work."

Perhaps it's Gordon-Montgomery's professional ascent that makes the premise of "Invincible Fight Girl," about a young girl who aspires to become a pro wrestler, sound so familiar, and personal. "I wanted to tell a story about a kid's

journey," he says. "Growing from an inexperienced but enthusiastic beginner in a challenging world, into someone who finds growth through testing herself, embracing struggle, and the support of friends and rivals — the same story for everyone who aspires to do something at a high-level experiences."

Enamored by the versatility and fluidity of the medium, Gordon-Montgomery thrills at the chance to tell a variety of stories, with a variety of sensibilities. "The possibilities of what you can do with it are truly endless," he says. "I think the most important thing we can do is tell stories that are engaging and interesting. If we succeed in that, in time, the context will come when the audience revisits the work at different points in their lives." — Todd Gilchrist

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When I was growing up I always wanted a girl character who could make anything happen for herself." — Natasha Kline



NATASHA KLINE

"Primos"

It was time for a new music video release on MTV, so Natasha Kline's family gathered around the television. Three-year-old Kline sat on her mother's lap as Tom Petty's animated "Runnin' Down a Dream" video blew her mind. "It was moving drawings," Kline recalls. "I thought, 'I don't know what this is, but I have to do this."

Kline made her first animated film in high school using an old VHS camcorder. "The most horrible way to animate frame by frame," she says. "That was not good, but it was a film." She eventually worked her way into real animation, earning an Emmy nomination for writing on "Big City Greens" while also serving as storyboard artist, director, designer and writer for everything from "South Park" to "BoJack Horseman" to "The Lego Ninjago Movie."

Kline, who credits Trey Parker as "a huge inspiration in helping

me see what is possible as a story-teller," is finally helming her own show: Disney Branded Television's "Primos" follows Tater, a quirky Mexican American girl whose 12 cousins move in for the summer; Tater's diary turns her private thoughts into elaborate animation sequences.

"When I was growing up I always wanted a girl character who could make anything happen for herself," Kline says. Giving kids the sense that their imagination can make anything possible is important to her, but it's especially important that Latinos see themselves on screen.

"Representation is one of the main reasons I got into animation. Growing up I felt like an outsider, wondering why I wasn't being included, so it's exciting to be a voice for them. I'm picturing my niece and cousins and thinking about how they'd want to be represented." — Stuart Miller



CHRISTIAN LINKE AND ALEX YEE

"Arcane"

"Arcane" co-creators Linke and Yee never thought their video game development careers at Riot Games would lead to them spearheading a popular animated Netflix series.

"It was really a trial by fire," Yee says of the pair's earliest ideas for the show's conception. "But I think the good thing was that we had a fair amount of time to scale up, from just a couple of guys with a big dream in a closet to a team that was capable of producing a TV show like this."

The show, produced in a collaboration between Riot and Fortiche Prods., breathes narrative life to "League of Legends" video game characters Vi and Jinx, voiced by Hailee Steinfeld and Ella Purnell, respectively. It recently took home multiple awards from the 2022 Emmys, including one for animated program and individual awards for a few of the show's animators.

"For all those unsung heroes, the people that work so hard every day and are part of this big production, I think it was a moment where people tipped their hat at what they contributed specifically," Linke says of the show's slew of awards recognition. "I think it was very, very awesome for the team."

Looking ahead to the show's second season, Yee says the duo are aware of the additional pressure that comes with any follow-up effort: "We are definitely coming out to higher expectations, but we also have a little bit more confidence in our instincts this time." — E.J. Panaligan

Animation is so freeing. We needed the freedom to create a brand-new Native series that celebrates our magic." — Karissa Valencia



NEERAJA RAJ
"Meow or Never"

Raj is one of the "Third Culture" adults, people who have grown up outside their parents' culture and are living outside the milieu in which they were raised. The offspring of Indian parents, she was born in Indonesia, moved to Dubai when she was 14, and went to school in Mumbai, and the U.K. She brings all these experiences into her creations, and says that they inspire her love for science fiction in her animation.

Her short "Meow or Never" is a stop-motion animated musical about a "catstronaut" in outer space pondering the meaning of life while exploring a planet with the help of an accident-prone puppy. Raj made the BAFTA-short-listed toon for her graduation film from the U.K. National Film and Television School. "Tve always been enamored of the unknown," Raj says. "Ithink we're all so minuscule and tiny when you think of how

how big the universe is. I am always curious what is out there and does any of this have any meaning. I think the film stems from that aspect of my personality."

She started working on "Meow or Never" before the pandemic lockdown; the whole process took 14 months. "It's not easy. Stop-motion is a very laborious, time-consuming process. You spend like the whole day and get like two seconds of work." Raj says that while she loves "to explore different ideas," she prefers to work in stop-motion. Her most recent is a 3-D film with a 2-D look that she is making with Nexus Studios that is coming out on the Intl. Day of the Girl Child, Oct. 11. But Raj would like to tackle feature-length films, too. "That's the ultimate dream, I want to make a feature. I want to make $many \, features." - \mathit{Shalini} \, \mathit{Dore}$



KARISSA VALENCIA

"Spirit Rangers"

Valencia is the creator and showrunner of Netflix's upcoming "Spirit Rangers," a preschool show about a Native American family, with an all-Native writers' room. Valencia, who's Mexican and Chumash, says animation was essential to convey the complexity and authenticity of the stories she and her collaborators will tell. "Animation is so freeing," she says. "We needed the freedom to create a brand-new Native series that celebrates our magic, superpowers, and create the most epic national park you've ever seen."

After being reduced for so long to caricatures and stereotypes, Valencia was most eager to design the look of a modern Indigenous family, the Skycedars, who are Chumash and Cowlitz. "By belonging to multiple tribes, we could show the family with different skin tones, hair color, eye color and body shapes. They exist in the

modern space and still love their culture." In telling their stories, which she compares to Grimms' fairy tales, she offers valuable lessons for the show's preschool audience. "Kids will get to walk a mile in another's shoes — or paws and claws — as they learn these life lessons."

While creating a series that's fun, exciting and informative, Valencia says she hopes that Hollywood will learn a few things from it as well. "Hollywood has always loved Indigenous stories. I'm hoping that 'Spirit Rangers' can be an example of what happens when Indigenous artists are given the support and trust to tell our own," she says.

"This show represents my love of animation, action-adventure, and my passion for representation — in front of and behind the camera." — Todd Gilchrist



I love the imperfectness and the touchy feel of stop-motion." — Sergio Valdivia



SERGIO VALDIVIA

"Pinocchio""

When Valdivia discovered stop-motion animation while at school in Guadalajara, Mexico, there was no turning back. "I found myselfignoring everything else and pouring all of myselfinto stop-motion," he says. "I love the imperfectness and the touchy feel of stop-motion," even though he acknowledges it is "kind of the hardest way to make cinema."

Growing up in Guadalajara helped. "We have a rich tradition of all this great art," he says. "I was exposed to this tradition and artists who had been making stop-motion in a very independent way here."

That tradition got a big boost from director Guillermo del Toro, who founded Centro Internacional de Animación a few years ago to produce stop-motion animation projects there and encourage young artists including Valdivia to embrace the tactile artform.

The 28-year-old artist's dedication to his craft paid off when he got the opportunity last year to work on del Toro's stop-motion "Pinocchio" at Guadalajara's Taller del Chucho animation studio. "His work so impressed our animation supervisor that we brought him up to our main unit [ShadowMachine] in Portland, Ore., where his talent and tenacity has blossomed," says "Pinocchio" co-producer Melanie Coombs.

Now that production has wrapped on "Pinocchio," Valdivia is back in Guadalajara, working on his own projects, including an educational series for adults addressing such topics as evolution and racism and a live-action/stop-motion hybrid documentary on Chicano culture with director Sofia Rosales. But he'll soon be heading back to Portland, this time to work at Laika on its upcoming movie "Wildwood." — Terry Flores



FAWN VEERASUNTHORN

"Wish"

For her directorial debut at Walt Disney Animation Studios, Veerasunthorn has a daunting task at hand: commemorating the 100-year legacy of Disney through the animated feature "Wish."

"In the beginning, all the directors and [writer] Jennifer Lee got together and talked about what this film would be, what it would mean to the audience, and what it would mean to us who grew up with Disney classics."

While perusing screencaps of the studio's animated films, the team gravitated toward "characters making a wish upon a star."

"Who was the first [person] who's ever done that? Maybe there's a story there," she says.

Growing up in Thailand, Veerasunthorn initially attended medical school. However, the art classes she would take on the weekends solidified her interest in drawing as a profession.

"Ilike telling stories, I like drawing — and I was too afraid to be in a big crowd of people, so I thought [live action] film was not my path," she says. "So, I found animation."

During her career at Disney spanning over a decade, she has worked as the story or storyboard artist on such films as "Frozen," "Moana" and "Zootopia." Most recently, she served as head of story on "Raya and the Last Dragon."

Up next, Veerasunthorn is taking the reins as a director for "Wish" alongside director and mentor Chris Buck. "Before, I would always ask myself, 'What does the director want? What [is] their vision?' and try to deliver on that," she says. "For this film, I get to make what excites me."

— Michaela Zee

Leveling Up on Gaming

Variety and Pixel United fete these impact honorees at the Leaders in Gaming &

 $\textbf{Entertainment Breakfast Oct. 4} \quad \bullet \quad \textit{By Kaare Erickson, Carole Horst, Todd Longwell}$



Hakan B. Abrak

CFO/co-owne

IO Interactive

Abrak executed a management buyout of IO Interactive's Japanese parent company, Square Enix Holdings, shortly after he was elevated to CEO of the Copenhagen-based video game developer in 2017, taking the company independent while retaining ownership of its hit franchise "Hitman," which released its latest installment, "Hitman 3," in January 2021. In the months since, the company has been focused on "Project 007," a new James Bond game that will explore the character's origin story.



Jason Altman Senior VP, Film & Television Ubisoft

Veteran gaming exec Altman saw that the convergence of gaming culture and storytelling on screen was a rich vein to mine, thus Ubisoft's first live-action series, the Apple TV+ hit "Mythic Quest," on which Altman was an exec producer. Other titles include the upcoming "Assassin's Creed" live-action TV series and feature film "The Division," both for Netflix. "Games that keep you thinking long after you've put them down" make great candidates for adaptation, he says. "Sometimes it's the power of an immersive fantasy, or choices you've made in a game that lead to unexpected places, but most often it's the emotion of the experience that stays with you."

←

Ubisoft's Jason Altman exec produces Apple TV+ series "Mythic Quest," starring Rob McElhenney as the head of a video game company.



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Sarah Bond Corporate VP, Game Creator Experience and Ecosystem

Microsoft bet on the future of gaming by doubling down on cloud gaming, its Game Pass subscription service and cross-platform play, opening up a wide world to gamers. Bond leads the charge in growing the organic ecosystem and her unit, which oversees the needs of game creators across all of Microsoft's software and services, including Xbox, Azure and Microsoft 365. As the former CVP of global gaming partnerships and development, Sarah was instrumental to the growth of Xbox and the success of Xbox Game Pass. "From my point of view-there are two ways to inspire and excite an audience. At the heart of every great story is an authentic human experience. When you can tell your story in a way that other people see themselves in it - that's magic," she says.



Matt Booty
VP
Xbox Game Studios

With blockbuster titles such as "Age of Empires," "Forza," which added support for American and British Sign Language so Deaf and hard-of-hearing players can enjoy the game, "Gears of War," "Halo," "Minecraft," "Doom" and more, under Booty, giant Xbox Game Studios has been going from strength to strength. Booty and XGS are also leading programs such as Game Camps, which foster new voices through mentorship in underrepresented communities like New Orleans and Atlanta. "Audiences engage with entertainment that brings to life a voice or vision that they can connect with personally. That makes the push for a diversity of creators and stories more vital than ever," he says.



Helen Chiang Studio Head of Minecraft Microsoft

Chiang has led the development of the world-building game Minecraft since 2018, expanding its creator ecosystem with its in-game marketplace and growing its portfolio of titles with 20 major releases in the past fiscal year alone. "We're still seeing the ripple effect of increased availability of games across all different types of devices, from smart TVs to mobile phones," she says. "That has fundamentally changed the way that people think about gaming and shifted perception of who a gamer is."



Marie-Sophie de Waubert Senior VP, Studio Operations Ubisoft

In May, Ubisoft ("Assassin's Creed," "Just Dance") upped de Waubert to her current post where she leads all of Ubisoft's AAA production studios worldwide. As a high-profile woman in a male-dominated business, she says, "Although there is always room for improvement, I'm seeing first-hand how women are making strides across the industry from game design to engineering and technology at large. Our work towards more diversity, equity and inclusion is an ongoing journey, a collective ride beyond the realm of gaming, and we, as companies and individuals, need to keep leading the change."







Anna Donlon Senior Vice President Naz Aletaha Global Head of League of Legends Esports Shauna Spenley

President of Entertainment

Riot Games

Donlon is the lead on Riot's breakout tactical shooter game "Valorant," while Aletaha is in charge of the world's largest esports league, League of Legends Esports, and Spenley is the force behind Riot's new entertainment business, responsible for the Emmy-winning series "Arcane." "With the industry trending away from retail box copies of games and towards high-quality games as a service as the standard, we are seeing more and more opportunities to create communities in and around these ecosystems and serve up experiences that transcend your time in game," says Donlon.



Although there is always room for improvement, I'm seeing first-hand how women are making strides across the industry — from game design to engineering and technology at large." — Marie-Sophie de Waubert



Derek Douglas Head of Games

An 18-year industry veteran, CAA games department chief Douglas has worked with a long list of major players including Obsidian, Turtle Rock, Airship Syndicate and Bad Robot Interactive. "Increasingly, our clients are exploring how they can integrate user-generated content into their games," he says. "This can be by publishing onto a platform like Roblox or investing in their own tools and technology to provide their audience with the means of self-expression and content creation that can be integrated into vast, shared social worlds."



Johanna Faries
Senior VP/General Manager, "Call of Duty"
Activision Blizzard

Faries oversees the best-selling franchise and commands live operations and franchise-wide strategy for "Call of Duty's" regular releases, the standalone "Warzone" mode and its esports league amid the publishing group's pending sale to Xbox owner Microsoft. On diversifying available "CoD" experiences, Faries says: "The most rewarding part has been seeing how we have broadened our global audience with new gameplay offerings and expanded innovation over the last few years." Beyond "CoD?" "'Candy Crush' continues to crush!"



Matt Fischer
Vice President, Head of Worldwide App Store
Apple

Fischer oversees the huge and hugely successful App Store, where more than 1 billion customers have downloaded games. Mobile games represent more than half of the overall games industry. Fischer's team is also responsible for creating Apple Arcade, the first-ever mobile gaming subscription service. "We've seen incredible growth in players who are looking for casual titles that they can easily jump in and out of for short gameplay sessions, but there is also a lot of interest from mobile gamers looking for deeper, more immersive console-quality experiences," he says. "The Hollywood-gaming connection is only going to get stronger as we see more and more brands cross over from TV and film to games, and vice versa."





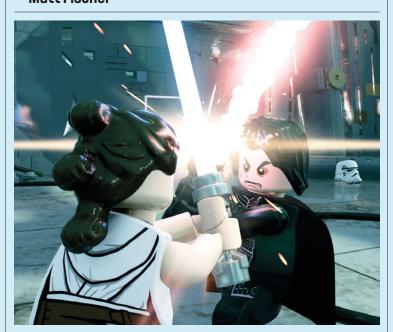
Shuntaro Furukawa President, Nintendo Doug Bowser President Nintendo of America

Furukawa and Bowser preside over global and American operations at Nintendo, respectively, with numbers to show for it. The Nintendo Switch console had sold 111 million units as of the first half of 2022, making it one of the all-time most successful gaming systems. And in 2021, it even outsold newer PlayStation and Xbox consoles. Switch exclusives including "The Legend of Zelda," "Super Mario" and "Animal Crossing" sell tens of millions of copies, and "Mario" is set for the big screen via Universal's upcoming 2023 film from Illumination, with Chris Pratt voicing the classic gaming character.

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The Hollywood-gaming connection is only going to get stronger as we see more and more brands cross over from TV and film to games, and vice versa."

— Matt Fischer



Warner Bros. Games had a hit this year with "Star Wars Lego: The Skywalker Saga."



Ivo Gerscovich Senior VP, Sega of America; Chief Brand Officer, Sonic the Hedgehog

Sega of America

Since 2016, Gerscovich has led the revival of the Sonic the Hedgehog brand with a succession of popular games (including the recently released "Sonic Origins" and the upcoming "Sonic Frontiers"), a pair of block-buster films from Paramount starring Jim Carrey and a growing licensing business. "I believe that we'll see an increased number of games designed for cross-platform play, allowing players to pick up and resume their favorite games across multiple devices, at home or on the go," he says.



David Haddad President Warner Bros. Games

Haddad's division scored two major hits in 2022. The first, "Star Wars Lego: The Skywalker Saga," drew from outside IP, while the second, the free-to-play online game "MultiVersus" had playable characters from the Warner Bros. family, ranging from Superman to Bugs Bunny. "The roots of disruption in the gaming world lie with some very familiar trends — more free-to-play, more cross-platform gaming, more mobile gamers around the globe and increasing levels of user expression or user content creation," he says.



Christoph Hartmann Vice President

Amazon Game

Hartmann develops games in-house (including the hit "New World") at Amazon, as well as publishes games from leading developers such as Smilegate's "Lost Ark." With internal access to Twitch and Amazon Web Services, along with a deep IP catalog that includes Prime Video and recently acquired MGM, he is uniquely positioned to create transmedia experiences that take the games into other mediums. "The more ways we can extend the experience of the brands you love across multiple channels, the longer these beloved IPs live on," he says.



Amy Hennig
President, New Media Division
Skydance New Media

A veteran of Naughty Dog and Electronic Arts, Hennig was brought aboard the just-launched Skydance New Media in 2019 to lead the development of big-budget, cinematic titles, starting with games set in the "Star Wars" galaxy and the Marvel Universe, the latter of which debuted a first-look trailer at Disney's D23 Expo in September. "We want our games to be inviting and accessible to all players, so we're designing our game mechanics from the ground up to be simple but deep," she says.



Sallie Hirsch General Manager, Crown Channel

Hirsch leads Crown Channel, a livestreaming offering from Amazon available across multiple platforms (including its own Prime Video and Twitch properties) that features gaming shows such as "Ultimate Crown" starring YouTube personality Jimmy "MrBeast" Donaldson, "Fight Night" and "Foodbeast Kitchen League" that have collectively reached 77.8 million viewers. "There are more people now who know or want to study gaming and this wave of broader expertise will change the industry across all aspects," she says.



Hermen Hulst
Head of PlayStation Studios
Sony Interactive Entertainment

Hulst went from success to success with PlayStation Studios in 2022, launching new marquee games ("Horizon Forbidden West," "Gran Turismo 7") and scoring blockbuster sales (33 million copies for the "Spider-Man" franchise on PlayStation as of May 2022). He also added to its recently formed mobile gaming division with the acquisition of Savage Game Studios in August 2022 and helped grow their business beyond the PlayStation console with the releases of "MLB the Show" for Nintendo Switch and Xbox and "Marvel's Spider-Man Remastered" for PC.



Gio Hunt VP, Oculus Studios at Meta [CQ]

A Harvard Law School grad who previously did long stints at AOL and Blizzard Entertainment, Hunt helps make sure Meta's game pipeline is flowing to feed its popular Meta Quest 2 VR head-set platform and serve the company's larger multibillion-dollar metaverse ambitions. "We're seeing second and second-generation games from established VR developers who really get how to use the new medium to create experiences that simply aren't even possible on a 2-D screen," he says.



Kendra Johnson Director, Global Head of Gaming Publishers YouTube

Johnson spearheads the objectives of YouTube's gaming publisher business and gaming product partnership globally, and is responsible for day-to-day operations and relationships across major gaming publishers. "The gaming publishers finding the most success on YouTube are those that understand the massive opportunity You-Tube's scale and multi-format content options bring to the fandoms of their games," says the former Twitch exec. "The gaming community on YouTube brings creators and players together to celebrate their favorite games in such unique and fun ways.... YouTube is special in that, by design, creators and companies of all sizes and shapes can find and grow an audience, generate revenue and build community."



M.J. Johnson
Senior Director of Global Marketing,
YouTube Gaming, Fan Funding & Shopping

As YouTube grows its gaming footprint, Johnson and his team have created initiatives that help celebrate, inform and have given publishers new venues to promote their games; a recent success was the launch of "Elden Ring," which logged 3.4 billion views in its first 60 days, YouTube Gaming's biggest launch ever. "Marketing breaks through clutter and achieves effective reach with... relevancy. The most important thing that marketing leaders can do for their company is to drive a deep understanding of the customer."



Mike Lang CEO Pixel United

Appointed CEO in 2019, Lang leads every aspect of operations and strategy for a global mobile games company that boasts seven of the top 100 titles in the sector. Games such as "Raid: Shadow Legends," "Lighting Link Casino" and "EverMerge" add to a mobile division worth nearly \$2 billion alone with three publishers under its belt at Australian parent company Aristocrat, which is otherwise known for manufacturing gambling machines. "As a mobile-first video game company, Pixel United benefits from the fact that almost everyone has a smartphone," says Lang. "This level of accessibility is what sets mobile gaming apart in media."



Damon Lau Head of Esports and Gaming UTA

As the leader of the UTA team representing 125-plus esports pros, content creators, streamers and game developers, Lau helps clients break into new verticals including music, sports, fashion, food and consumer tech via efforts such as a Ralph Lauren Fragrances campaign that gaming influencer client FaZe Swagg streamed to 600,000-plus followers on Twitch in August. "Advertisers and consumer brands have just recently began viewing the metaverse as a conduit to speak to a global gaming community, and that development is very exciting," he says.



Terry Li General Manager, Crunchyroll Games; Senior VP, Emerging Business

Since the 2021 acquisition of Crunchyroll by Sony, Li has unified anime games efforts across the Sony Pictures Entertainment portfolio, building out his team and pipeline to complement existing mobile titles including "My Hero Academia: The Strongest Hero," based on the hit anime. "At Crunchyroll, we see games as one of a multitude of touchpoints with our fans, so it's about providing a holistic experience around both the game and the anime. We also want to provide a variety of engagement points because it helps immerse fans into the IP and build a deeper fandom," Li says.



Michelle Liu Global CEO Tencent Games, Tencent

Liu oversees all of Tencent's global games publishing business, including "PUBG Mobile," which has passed \$8 billion in revenue since its 2018 release; "Honor of Kings"; the recently launched "Tower of Fantasy;" as well as upcoming games: "Avatar: Reckoning," "Synced" and "Undawn." She joined Tencent in 2013 and has overseen its global gaming business since 2019, building and developing its global R&D and publishing capabilities. Her areas of expertise include mobile gaming, global business management and global studio partnerships, and under her, Tencent Games has notched significant growth in its global games business and publishes or owns some of the sector's most-valuable IP.



Laura Miele COO Electronic Arts

Before assuming the role of COO in 2021, Miele led worldwide studios at the publisher, overseeing key franchises including the EA Sports portfolio, "Battlefield" and "Mass Effect." Now, Miele is focused on building and maintaining lucrative partnerships. In 2022, EA was added as the title sponsor to all LaLiga football competitions in a multi-year pact for EA Sports FC that includes more than 300 additional partners. More recently, an "Iron Man" game was announced by EA and Marvel, following multiple "Star Wars" games announced in collaboration with Lucasfilm Games. "We love these partnerships because they delight and meet the interests of our players," says Miele. "They excite and inspire our game creators.'



Yasuo Miyakawa President & CEO Bandai Namco Entertainment

In 2022, Bandai Namco released blockbuster "Elden Ring," co-created with George R.R. Martin, that became an all-time bestseller with 16.6 million copies sold and counting. The company also announced development of a live-action "Pac-Man" feature, has an animated "Tekken: Bloodline" series on Netflix, based on its beloved games and a live-actioner with Legendary based on popular "Gundam" anime and games. "The spectacular world created by the collaboration of Hidetaka Miyazaki and George R.R. Martin has captured the imagination of tens of millions of people worldwide, and that success is fueled by Bandai Namco Entertainment's global marketing effort and of course the pedigree and development talent of Miyazaki and his team at FromSoftware," he says.



Tim O'Brien Chief Revenue Office

Since joining Scopely from Disney in 2014, O'Brien has led its expansion, most recently spearheading the \$1 billion acquisition of GSN Games from Sony. He has worked with Hollywood on games created for Marvel, WWE, Hasbro and closed a first of its kind deal with Paramount to bring the entire Star Trek universe to "Star Trek: Fleet Command." "A highly recognized franchise can be valuable, but also challenging to build an always-evolving experience that stays true to the brand's universe. Game teams have to be extremely creative and thoughtful as they expand a beloved brand within a game," he says.



Ted Price Founder & CEO Insomniac Games

Price founded Insomniac in 1994 and went on to score hits with franchises such as "Spyro the Dragon" and "Ratchet & Clank" and, starting in 2018, Marvel's "Spider-Man" series. The company was acquired by Sony for \$229 million in 2019. "For us to reflect our audiences and create content that's more relatable, we need team members from all backgrounds, from all cultures and races, representing all genders" he says. "This means actively pursuing more diverse candidates."



Asad Qizilbash
Head of PlayStation Productions,
Head of Product for PlayStation Studios
Sony Interactive Entertainment

A 16-year PlayStation veteran, Qizilbash works with the PlayStation Studios development teams to translate its gaming IP into film and television projects for PlayStation Prods. such as the currently lensing "Gran Turismo" movie, starring Orlando Bloom. "For the longest time, film and television were the main influences as they were mass market and had cultural currency," he says. "That has changed a lot now that gaming is more mass market, with storytelling in games being so much more sophisticated than ever."



Shane Rahmani Global Head of Media, Entertainment & Gaming Partnership Solutions

Rahmani and his team operate as thought leaders, deal strategists and industry connectors to help make Google's enormous gaming business (sprawling across Play, ads, YouTube and Cloud) easier for gaming developers, publishers and creators. "I believe the best way to engage gaming fans for the long term is to invest in 'user-generated' as a content, community and product strategy. UGC transformed the music and video industries and now plays an outsized role in helping to fuel gaming fandom across a variety of activities, from user-created games and worlds to virtual goods to streaming," he says. "Gaming franchises investing in sandbox experiences for users and a seamless way to share them could see their fandoms flourish, in and out of world, between releases, for years to come."



Jim Ryan
President and CEO
Sony Interactive Entertainment

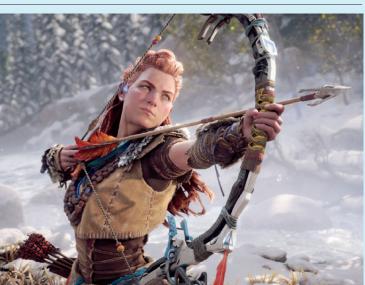
Since taking the reins of Sony Interactive Entertainment in 2019, Ryan has helped drive the sale of more than 20 million PlayStation 5 consoles and push the platform's number of monthly active users past the 100 million mark, while growing its portfolio of gaming IP and improving accessibility. "It excites me when I hear the stories where gamers with various needs are able to experience our games for the first time all because of the features we are implementing into our software," he says.



Nya Shirzad Head of Incubation/Executive Producer Bungie

Shirzad is a nine-year veteran of Bellevue, Wash.-based Bungie (creator of the iconic "Halo" franchise), which Sony acquired for \$3.6 billion in July 2022. She's managed large teams working on iterations of its "Destiny" games, from development to post-launch support planning. "Games are crossing media types, becoming TV shows, influencing fashion, driving YouTube and TikTok content," she says. "We're leaning into all of this, recognizing that people want more than what games have offered in the past."







Building a diverse team is core to our business strategy and we are proud to say that we are currently 50% women, 50% non-white and just getting started." —Anna Sweet



Sean Shoptaw Senior VP Walt Disney Games

You'd struggle to find a portfolio of IP as widespread in gaming as that under Shoptaw's purview. Lucasfilm Games has several "Star Wars" titles in the works at EA, Ubisoft and Skydance New Media, in addition to an "Indiana Jones" at Bethesda. Meanwhile, Sony Interactive Entertainment's most successful franchise sporting more than 33 million copies sold on PlayStation is "Marvel's Spider-Man," with a "Wolverine" game also on the way. Plus, a fourth "Kingdom Hearts" game featuring Mickey and friends is in development at longtime partner Square Enix. "We're actively exploring opportunities for original games featuring some of Disney's classic characters," says Shoptaw, who thinks Donald Duck's backstory would make a great game.



Angie Smets
Studio Director, Executive Producer
Guerrilla Games

Smets adjusted the workflow at her Amsterdam-based Sony-owned studio Guerrilla Games, relocating employees' entire work set-ups to their homes during the pandemic, enabling them to complete the new action role playing game "Horizon Forbidden West," released in February. They're working on "Horizon Call of the Mountain" for PlayStation VR2, due to launch in 2023. "[It's] designed from the ground-up for VR, and there are a lot of technical innovations with the new PlayStation VR2 headset that we're playing with," she says.



Phil Spencer CEO, Gaming

Spencer, who's been at Microsoft since 2002, has been the top dog at Xbox for close to a decade and has been steering the console brand through big moves in recent years. After rapidly expanding the development teams under Xbox Game Studios, Microsoft completed its acquisition of Bethesda owner ZeniMax in 2021 for \$7.5 billion before upping the stakes in 2022 with an agreement to buy "Call of Duty" publisher Activision Blizzard for \$68.7 billion. What games is he looking forward to? "I'm looking forward to so many games currently in development," he says. "It's hard not to say Forza Motorsport. The legacy of Forza on Xbox goes back to the first Xbox console, and what the team at Turn 10 is making for this version is ambitious and impressive."



Tim Sweeney
Founder/CE0
Epic Games

The company taught your kids dance moves via "Fortnite," but Sweeney's Epic Games is much more than that. It operates a rival PC storefront to Steam, publishes games such as "Fall Guys," owns music platform Bandcamp and licenses the fifth incarnation of Unreal Engine to developers big and small. Epic only takes 12% of the revenue earned by third parties on Epic Games Store and further reduces that take on products using Unreal, a pro-developer move that Epic has invoked in ongoing legal battles with Apple and Google regarding Epic's refusal to comply with 30% cuts the tech giants take on purchases made through their respective mobile storefronts.



Anna Sweet CEO Bad Robot Games

Bad Robot Games hasn't announced much in the way of projects, either in-house or as a publisher, but Sweet and her team have been working as creative consultants with game makers including Wolfeye ("Weird West") and Unknown Worlds ("Moonbreaker"), both of which received early investments from the company, helping them with narrative and design. "Building a diverse team is core to our business strategy and we are proud to say that we are currently 50% women, 50% non-white and just getting started," she says.



Haruhiro Tsujimoto President/COO

Capcom

Tsujimoto has enjoyed years of block-buster success with Capcom's "Resident Evil," "Street Fighter" and "Monster Hunter" franchises. He began at the company as a college student in the '80s, eventually working his way up to the No. 2 position under his father, Capcom founder chairman and CEO Kenzo Tsujimoto, in 2007. The company is working on a remake of "Resident Evil 4," an over-the-shoulder third-person shooter first released in 2005, due for release in March.



Richard Webb Agent, Digital Media & Gaming WME

Hailing from esports entity FaZe Clan, Webb joined WME in 2020 to help lead a roster of esports talent, streamers and game creators. At a time when gaming platforms such as "Fortnite" and Roblox frequently partner with big-name music acts, agencies including WME are uniquely positioned to get involved in cross-media capacities. Such was the case in July with TimTheTatman's Tailgate event, which featured a \$100,000 "Fortnite" competition and other tournaments thrown by content creator and WME client TimTheTatman, plus live performances from fellow clients Kane Brown and Mitchell Tenpenny. "By looking at gaming with a 360-degree view, we are redefining how gaming entertainment is not only created but consumed as well," says Webb.



Evan Wells and Neil Druckmann exec produced Sony's hit "Uncharted," starring Mark Wahlberg and Tom Holland, based on their video game.



Evan Wells Co-President Neil Druckmann

Naughty Dog

Wells has as served president or co-president of Naughty Dog since 2004, the same year Druckmann was hired as a programmer. Co-leaders of the Sony-based studio since 2020, they both served as executive producers on the 2022 big-screen adaptation of their hit game franchises "Uncharted." They recently released a remake of the post-apocalyptic adventure game "The Last of Us," which is being turned into an HBO series due in 2023, with Druckmann serving as co-creator/showrunner alongside Craig Mazin.

Lars Wingefors
Founder/CEO

Embracer Grou

After starting a used-comics business at age 13, Wingefors' career has come full circle through Embracer's acquisition of Dark Horse Media, which was finalized earlier this year, adding hundreds more IP to a portfolio containing more than 800 properties. The company owns about a dozen game publishers, notably Saber Interactive, THQ Nordic, Gearbox and a new group comprising studios recently bought from Square Enix, which added "Tomb Raider" as an IP. Embracer also just bought the media rights to Middle-earth Enterprises (cq), granting the company control over current and future "Lord of the Rings" projects, including Amazon's "The Rings of Power" series.



Christina Wootton VP, Global Head of Partnerships Roblox

In her nearly nine years with Roblox, Wootton has established numerous long-term strategic relationships for the social gaming platform with brands from the worlds of entertainment (Netflix, Disney, Warner Bros.), sports (NFL, WWE, FC Barcelona) and apparel (Nike, Gucci). "Brands and talent are realizing the power of our community as a way to connect with fans, test new ideas, and explore new avenues for visibility amongst an audience who has grown up with advanced technology," she says.

Middleburg Film Festival Fetes Above- and Below-the-Line Artists

Honorees Rian Johnson and his editor Bob Ducsay to participate in conversation at the fest • By Jazz Tangcay

The Middleburg Film Festival, running Oct. 13-16 in Virginia, will open with Noah Baumbach's "White Noise," starring Adam Driver, and the centerpiece "Knives Out" sequel "Glass Onion." Other films announced for the 10th edition are "Whale" from helmer Darren Aronofsky and Ray Romano's "Somewhere in Queens." More films are expected to join the slate.

So far the fest has announced it will honor Stephanie Hsu with

the Rising Star Award; Baumbach with its 10th anniversary Spotlight Filmmaker Award; "Nope" composer Michael Abels with the Distinguished Composer Award; and Rian Johnson with its Distinguished Screenwriter Award.

Academy Award-nominated writer, director and producer Johnson knows a thing or two about editing a film, after all he cut 2005's "Brick." But editor Bob Ducsay is his go-to, who he says

really "taught me how to collaborate with an editor."

Having met a little over 10 years ago, the two have since collaborated on five movies including their latest, "Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery," a whodunnit sequel to the 2019 film.

Johnson and Ducsay will be honored with the Variety Creative Collaborators Award in celebration of their work together.

Here, they talk about their rela-

tionship and the secret to working together.

Going back to your first meeting, how did you two cross paths?

Rian Johnson: I was looking for an editor for "Looper," and my producer Ram Bergman met with Bob and really liked him. Bob, where did we sit down?

Bob Ducsay: It was somewhere in your neighborhood. Ram and I had met on two years prior on



Rian Johnson,
director of
"Glass Onion:
A Knives Out
Mystery," and his
longtime editor,
Bob Ducsay, will
be honored at
Middleburg Film
Festival.

another movie that needed some work. I didn't end up getting the iob, but he remembered me. When Rian was looking for somebody on "Looper," he hooked us up.

• It's been over a decade, how has your relationship evolved, and Bob, how does it help you as an editor when Rian brings you into the process early?

Johnson: I feel like Bob has taught me how to work with, and how to collaborate with an editor.

Before my first film, "Brick," I had $made \, at on \, of shorts \, and \, I \, cut \, them \,$ all myself. Lcut "Brick."

I worked with a lovely and wonderful editor, Gabriel Wrye, on "The Brothers Bloom" and was actively engaged. But throughout our working relationship, a lot of patience on his part, and trust building between us, he has taught me how to be a true collaborator. I still have an editor's brain, but at this point, it's almost two minds working together, that lock in sync when we're working. It feels like where we are completing each other's sentences.

Ducsay: It was very interesting coming in at the start because Rian had his first two movies. I

think that that must have been very difficult for him because it's such an intimate, precise process.

Every detail, every nuance, down to the frame, which is 24th of a second, gets debated in your mind when you're cutting a movie. So, if you already have the instincts of an editor, which Rian does, I bet it was difficult to have somebody come in and do that job. I found that we hit it off right from the beginning, which is true of all collaborations in moviemaking.

Over this decade of collaborating, I feel it's such a comfortable and positive working relationship, because you hope to bring things beyond what someone could do on their own, and I work very hard to do that. But at the same time, you're also learning everything that the director, in this case Rian, wants out of their movie and what their vision is.

Your job is always to work toward that vision. I think it's particularly intricate with editing because it's so involved in the storytelling. Where we've gotten to over yours is extraordinary. But even beyond that, I think one of the things that's interesting



Noah Baumbach's "White Noise." starring Adam Driver, is on the festival's program.

Ray Romano's

"Somewhere in Queens," in which

he stars with

will unspool at

about editor/director relationships is that they are really close relationships. You can stand in a room for 12 hours a day. I think that's the greatest thing because we can have an incredible amount of fun doing a really hard job, and we enjoy doing it.

 What's been fascinating is seeing you both move through different genres, starting with sci-fi for "Looper," going into "Star Wars" and finally the whodunnit of it all. How did you two work on that going into these different worlds?

Johnson: Every movie has its challenges. But I think what's more striking to me is how similar they all are in terms of the working process. "Star Wars" didn't feel significantly different than "Looper" and that didn't feel significantly different than "Knives Out." We're always sitting down, and it's the same hard choices in terms of what you cut. It's the same decision of keeping it balanced. It's the same pacing considerations. It's different for each movie.

But I will say the one thing, I truly appreciated having Bob for "Star Wars." Beyond the creative collaboration, it's hard to communicate the technical challenge that the editorial department faces in cutting a movie of that size and complexity, technically.

I had never encountered movies that big before. The reality is when something is that big and complex in terms of the effects work, the sound, and all of it almost becomes a different thing in terms of the technical challenge.

Bob had done those size movies before, so he and his team made that easy and they just faded into the background so that Bob and I could engage with the creative work.

Ducsay: To Rian's point, they are an incredible technical challenge. Everyone who does them knows this. But being able to manage them and maintain focus on what's most important, character and story, is sometimes challenging. Regardless of the scale of the movie, you're trying to tell a good story and craft great characters.

"Knives Out" is called an editor's film, what would you say to that?

Johnson: It really is true that these are editor's movies, 98% of the editing is shaping performance, loving your actors and trying to apply the best you can to shape their performances so that you're presenting the best of what they gave you.

Ducsay: The real secret to it is that great actors and a great screenplay make the picture editor's job extremely easy, and that's it. That's the truth.



WHAT: Middleburg Film Festival WHEN: Oct. 10-13 WHERE: Middleburg, Va. WEB: middleburgfilm.org





Your job is to always work toward that [director's] vision. I think it is particularly intricate with editing because it is so involved in the storytelling." - Bob Ducsay

Small Town, Big Film Love

Mill Valley fest celebrates 45 years with the latest awards hopefuls • By Todd Gilchrist

Located 14 miles north of San Francisco with a population of just over 14,000, the community of Mill Valley has evolved into a West Coast epicenter for showcasing independent and international films. As the Mill Valley Film Festival prepares to celebrate its 45th year with screenings of films by Rian Johnson ("Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery"), Darren Aronofsky ("The Whale") and Alejandro G. Iñárritu ("Bardo, False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths"), original founder and director Mark Fishkin attributes its pedigree for attracting toptier talent to its unique combination of geographic and philosophical specificities.

"The Mill Valley Film Festival has the best of both worlds: the clout of an urban festival and the ambiance of the destination festival," says Fishkin. "And this aspect of being professional but unpretentious is still very important to us."

Fishkin conceived the festival, running Oct. 6-16 this year, precisely because he managed to be in the right place at the right time. A former ceramics sculptor operating an art gallery in Aurora, Colo, in the 1970s, Fishkin visited the Telluride Film Festival, then only in its second year, because a friend opened a restaurant there. That festival experience sparked feelings rooted in his days of playing hooky from school to watch the "Million Dollar Movie" on local New York television station WOR.

Shortly thereafter, Fishkin moved to Northern California seeking to buy a movie theater.

"A couple of them fell through, and then I found this little theater in Mill Valley, and I immediately used it to start the festival," he says. Without a lot of other festivals to



draw upon for operational guidance, Fishkin launched Mill Valley as a nonprofit organization.

He would set the programming mold in the festival's first year by showcasing a pair of Marin County directors: Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas. "I showed Francis Coppola's very first film, 'The Rain People,' and a little-known film by George Lucas on the making of 'The Rain People,' called 'The Filmmaker.'"

Buoyed by the support of other local filmmakers including John Korty and Hal Ashby, whom the festival would later honor, Fishkin formulated a simple ethos for choosing which films to show.

"Whether you call it coming from the Beat [Generation] or the '60s or even influenced by myself and other programmers unconsciously, we do love all kinds of film, but the highest level has to have something to say."

The festival has since honored or invited hundreds of artists to attend, including Robin Williams,

Helen Mirren, Mira Nair, Roger Corman, Bradley Cooper, Waldo Salt, Ismail Merchant and Brie Larson

Brendan Fraser

will receive an

Mill Valley for

"The Whale," which makes

its West Coast

festival.

premiere at the

acting award at

For Mill Valley's 45th anniversary, programmers have assembled a murderers row of films and filmmakers including the festival's opening night, which "Glass Onion" writer-director Johnson will attend with three cast members and producer Ram Bergman. Additionally, "Clemency" director Chinonye Chukwu will make his second appearance at Mill Valley with his latest film, "Till" and its star Danielle Deadwyler. Brendan Fraser will receive an award for acting in conjunction with Aronofsky's "The Whale," which makes its West Coast premiere. And "White Noise" will screen

TIPSHEET

WHAT: Mill Valley Film Festival WHEN: Oct. 6-16 WHERE: Mill Valley WEB: mfvv.com in conjunction with an in-person presentation of the festival's screenwriting award to director Noah Baumbach.

"I don't know what these filmmakers have been eating over this pandemic, but it's really quite remarkable," says Fishkin.

Fishkin takes special pride in *Variety*'s 10 Screenwriters to Watch events, take place on Oct. 15-16. *Variety* features editor Malina Saval will moderate a panel discussion with this year's class, who include Joel Kim Booster ("Fire Island"), Ximena García Lecuona ("Anything's Possible") and Carrie Solomon (Margot Robbie's "Ocean's Eleven" prequel).

Presented since 1978 by the California Film Institute, which Fishkin also founded, Mill Valley keeps its eye trained as much on industry trends as individual achievements. He'll moderate a State of the Industry panel at which producer Ted Hope ("In the Bedroom"), director Crystal Moselle ("Sofia") and writer-director and former Mill Valley resident Nikyatu Jusu ("Nanny") will examine a post-pandemic exhibition landscape in which festivals can complement, and benefit from, the blockbuster films driving the revival of box office revenues. "Festivals are really important in a sense that they're priming the pump for people to get back in the theaters."

Admitting that he's "excited about the future, but nervous about it, like everybody," Fishkin looks forward to unveiling a lineup he considers worthy of an anniversary of 45 years.

"The themes that come out of any given curation can be done premeditated, or just a result of what's happening, but these are serious films dealing with some of the most important issues of our time. They give us creative stories with strong points of view that stimulate our minds and nurture our spirits, whether from an oral, written or a cinematic tradition. Our common humanity, our hopes, challenges, tragedies and wish for a resurrection is universal — and that's why I devoted going on five decades to the theatrical aspect of our industry." 2

Andrea Berloff Brings Grit and Gripping Drama to Big Screen

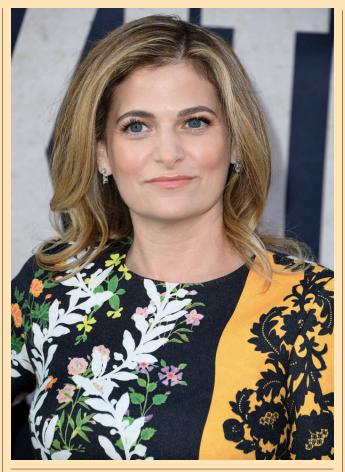
Variety's Creative Impact in Screenwriting honoree ascends filmmaking ranks • By Malina Saval

In the late 1990s, after teaching herself screenplay structure by way of reading Viki King's seminal go-to manual "How to Write a Movie in 21 Days," Andrea Berloff emerged with her first feature script titled "Liberty," a comedy set in a small-town Ohio dart tournament.

"I had no idea at that point that there were three acts in a movie — I'd never had a class in it," says Berloff, who cut her teeth as a theater major at Cornell U., poring over Greek tragedies and Shakespeare's dramas.

And while "very few people read that script," the friends who gave "Liberty" a look served as "encouragement to keep writing," says Berloff, who would go on to option her second, the biopic "Harry and Caresse" to Fine Line (the then-specialty division of New Line) in 2003, pen the Oliver Stone drama "World Trade Center" and net an Academy Award nomination for co-writing, with Jonathan Herman, the 2015 N.W.A origin story "Straight Outta Compton." In 2019, Berloff made her directorial debut with "The Kitchen," a gritty adaptation of the DC Comics' graphic novel about gangsters' wives in 1970s Hell's Kitchen.

But while Berloff, Variety's 2022
Creative Impact in Screenwriting
honoree, has worked consistently
— and on an impressive slate of
high-profile feature films — since
that inaugural script sale in 2003,
navigating the entertainment biz
as a woman has not been without its learning curves. Berloff,
who made a name for herself as
a master of the female-driven
period piece when starting out,
knew that if she wanted to achieve



Andrea Berloff
earned an Oscar
nomination
for co-writing
"Straight Outta
Compton."

enduring, long-term success as a Hollywood screenwriter, she needed "to write like a boy."

"I kind of looked around and was like, 'there aren't a lot of female-driven period piece jobs here in 2003, and if I want to have a career, I better figure out how to write differently,' "says Berloff, who will be feted at this year's Mill Valley Film Festival and take part in a conversation there Oct. 16.

"I took a few months and studied cop movies, watched every Scorsese movie and was really adamant that my next job was going to be that, because I wanted a career," Berloff continues. "In that era, that meant I had to learn how to write like a boy. I spent at least 10 to 12 years writing like a boy. I knew that if I was going to go into the room [to pitch] then I needed to have harder action than everybody else. I was going to write tougher guys, more violence. And I built a reputation for that for many, many years."

With "Straight Outta Compton," Berloff netted well-deserved critical accolades, not only for penning a riveting and nuanced backstory of one of America's seminal hip-hop groups, but also for the humanity with which she fleshed out the film's real-life characters, from Ice Cube to Eazy-E.

"I was super into hip-hop music in high school and college and my view has always been that it's protest music about the civil rights movement and the First Amendment," says Berloff. "Civil rights was something that we talked about a lot as a family, and something that's important to me. So, when the movie job came along I thought, the music is cool, but I'm not interested in doing a biopic. I'm more interested in doing a civil-rights movie. And when I pitched that version to Ice Cube, he wanted that version. I've definitely caught a lot of flak over the years, like, why did I get hired for that? And I know why. It's because I was the only person at that point who pitched it as a civil-rights movie."

Berloff, whose next film, Niki Caro's Jennifer Lopez starrer "The Mother," is due out on Netflix in 2023, has become a seasoned pro in penning compelling, fast-paced dramas. But Berloff also posseses a knife-sharp sense of humor, which she will soon put to work directing "a talent-driven comedy at Netflix," the exact details of which are not yet being made public.

The project is part of Berloff's brand new overall filmmaking deal with Netflix, an endeavor she calls "really exciting."

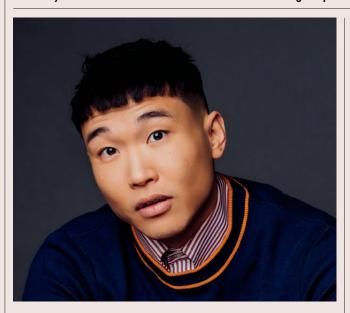
"It's got a really unusual structure to it," says Berloff of the deal, which partners her with fellow screenwriter John Gatins, who nabbed an Oscar nom for penning the 2012 high-octane drama "Flight," starring Denzel Washington.

"The [deal] is for everything, soup to nuts — writing, directing, consulting, helping out editors and filmmakers, making our own movies. It's a little bit of a return to the old studio system. It's a bit of an experiment, for both Netflix and me"

At the core of all cinematic efforts remains Berloff's love for big-screen stories. "I'm a movie girl. That's where my heart is." •

Scribe Tribe's Rising Stars

Variety's 10 Screenwriters to Watch are making a splash on awards and film festival circuits



JOEL KIM BOOSTER "Fire Island"

"I'm very lucky that I had the ability to sort of see it fully realized myself," Booster says of his first film "Fire Island," in which he also stars.

"There's an immense amount of pressure as a creator from a couple of marginalized communities creating a story about being a marginalized community within a marginalized community," he says, referring to LGBTQIA+ and Asian American people. "I knew that it was going to either be completely ignored or dismissed, or it would find its audience and really hit with them. And I think that a little bit of both has happened."

The Hulu rom-com received widespread critical and social media praise for its representation and fresh take on the genre. A standout moment is a rousing game of charades, with characters acting out "My Cousin Vinny" dialogue. "It was one of my favorite things to write, and it's one of my

favorite things to shoot and to continually watch, so I'm so proud of that moment in the movie."

As for what's next, Booster, a self-described "nerd" who owns more than 1,000 comic books says, "I'm really excited to do something possibly really different from 'Fire Island.' I'm really interested in playing with the genre moving forward. The next rom-com that I do I would love to be set in the midst of the biblical apocalypse or something like that. I'm really fascinated and interested in creating these slices of life, domestic stories set against a backdrop that is really heightened and fantastical."

Reps: Agent: WME; Management: Omnipop Talent Group; Legal: Felker Toczek Suddleson Abramson McGinnis Ryan

Influences: Issa Rae, Phoebe
Waller-Bridge, Michaela Coel
— Alexa Harrison



KATY BRAND
"Good Luck to You, Leo Grande"

Brand's "Good Luck to You, Leo Grande" opened up a lot of healthy conversations and think pieces about sex, sexuality, body dysmorphia and middle age after its June 17 release on Hulu.

And if that sounds like a lot for one film to parse, Brand's script balances it beautifully. In the film, which bowed at Sundance, Emma Thompson plays a retired, widowed teacher who hires sex worker Leo (Daryl McCormack) in order to achieve orgasm. But the simple premise turns complex as her fears, expectations, demands, wants and needs spill out, mixing with Leo's own fears, expectations, needs and sense of self.

"I'm just very pleased about it because of all the kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds, all different countries, all different ages, different genders — I've had this incredible spread of feedback," says Brit Brand, who may be better-known as an actor, with loads of series ("Mongrels," "Circle Square") and features to her credit.

"The scenario itself interested me in the sense of two interesting people, two very different people, in quite an extraordinary situation and what would happen in that scenario," she says. "But also just the wider subject matter of making a comedy about sex and shame and societal pressures and just things that we all feel."

She's written another script that's in development but her heart is in performing. "I love getting up on stage and singing and dancing, and I love a bit of showbiz, you know, stuff that just a bit of razzle dazzle."

Reps: Manager: Vivienne Clore, London

Influences: Nora Ephron, Billy
Wilder, Steven Spielberg
— Carole Horst



PROUDLY CONGRATULATES

shiwani srivastava





ON HER INCLUSION IN VARIETY'S 10 SCREENWRITERS TO WATCH



SARAH CONRADT "Mother's Instinct"

Conradt's adaptation of the Belgian film "Mother's Instinct" wrapped production last summer, and features Jessica Chastain and Anne Hathaway, with veteran cinematographer Benoît Delhomme slipping into the director's chair.

"What drew me to this story was the transformation in the relationship between these two women who leaned on each other in every way as best friends," she says. "And in the flash of a single moment, a single tragedy, everything they'd been to each other is suddenly redefined in much darker terms as they both cope with loss. I find that kind of shift in relationships fascinating."

Recent efforts include an adaptation of Italian thriller "The Double Hour," while her script for "Dead of Winter" was recently set up at Netflix. "I work on projects 363 days a year. I'm relentless about taking off Christmas and my

birthday, but I'm very dedicated to doing what I love. I write late nights — sometimes all night — but I'm not sure how much longer I can keep that up."

Conradt's childhood was rich in the arts and came with a deep appreciation of nature, which led to an eclectic taste in cinema; she cites "Sophie's Choice" and "Jacob's Ladder" as inspirational efforts. "It's always been important to me to leave a story on a note of hope. I love looking into the dark, and going deeper into the tangle of emotional layers, but I think we all need to see that light at the end of the tunnel — maybe now more than ever."

Reps: Agency: Gersh; Management: Sugar 23; Legal: Gang, Tyre, Ramer, Brown & Passman **Influences:** T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, early Jane Campion — *Nick Clement*



ALEX CONVERY
"Sole Man"

Two and a half years ago, Convery was strapped for ideas. He had representation and two of his spec scripts had landed on the Black List, but he'd yet to see any of his screenplays make it into production, and he was looking for inspiration. He found it in one of the most relatable experiences known to modern man: shut up inside his apartment during the pandemic, watching the Michael Jordan doc series "The Last Dance" on ESPN.

However, the screenplay that he completed, titled "Air Jordan," is not a biopic. Now called "Sole Man," the film is a gripping, witty boardroom procedural zeroing in on a few fateful days in the life of Sonny Vaccaro, a scrappy sports marketing guru who persuaded skeptical execs at a then-struggling upstart sneaker company, Nike, to bet the bank on an endorsement deal with a rookie NBA player from North Carolina back in 1984.

"You always look for backdoor ways into very famous figures or stories, and obviously Michael Jordan is right up there," the Chicago native says. "Being able to portray this now-billion-dollar company as an underdog, and Michael as a sort of unknown quantity, those two things in parallel really interested me."

Convery's script made the Black List, and was optioned. The writer assumed little would come of it, until Ben Affleck expressed an interest in directing and co-starring in it, bringing Matt Damon along to play Vaccaro. The film wrapped principal photography in July, and is tentatively set for release on Amazon next year.

Reps: Agent: UTA; Management: Grandview

Influences: Joel and Ethan Coen, Tony Gilroy

— Andrew Barker

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I need to focus on character and allow the world, plot, story and themes to grow organically." — Samuel D. Hunter



EVAN DODSON
"Terms of Endearment"

At age 21, Dodson became the youngest writer on The Black List. Now 27, he radiates brighter than ever with the remake of "Terms of Endearment," "Little Richard" for Apple and "Two Butterflies."

When "Terms of "Endearment" came about, he had just completed the Universal Writers Lab when he received a call.

"My team asked if I saw the 1983 film and told me Lee Daniels was remaking it," he says. "They needed a possible rewrite. I read the screenplay and loved his new take on the story."

The film will center around a black family in the 1980s and 1990s, and Oprah Winfrey is in talks to play Shirley MacLaine's iconic role. Dodson's screenplay focuses on historically important factors within the Black community. He can't discuss details yet, but "Little Richard" is a biopic on the Architect of Rock and Roll. Before any-

thing else, "Two Butterflies" was the first feature Dodson tackled.

"I was a sophomore in college at the time, and it started the entire trajectory of my career."

Dodson's work paid off — Academy Award-winning actor Viola Davis is set to star, along with the possibility of Regina King.

"It's about two sisters who went through this horrific tragedy," says Dodson. "In the present day, they rebuild their relationship during a road trip; however, one sister has dementia. It's about healing and attaining forgiveness from someone who has no recollection of the pain they caused. That's a screenplay near and dear to my heart."

Reps: Agent: Verve
Influences: Michael Arndt,
Michaela Coel, Lena Waithe
— Michael Lee Simpson



SAMUEL D. HUNTER

"The Whale"

Hunter's interest in cinema and the stage took shape when he was in high school, and in 2014, he received a MacArthur Genius Grant for his work as a playwright. "I started making short movies with my parents' camcorder when I was a teenager growing up in the '90s in north Idaho. I would enlist my friends as actors and edit the movies by hooking together two VCRs. Eventually, I got frustrated with the technology, and I started writing plays. Then I just completely fell in love with the theater."

He recently adapted his award-winning play, "The Whale," with Darren Aronofsky at the helm and Brendan Fraser starring, for the big-screen. It hits theaters in December. "In the last 10 years, I've been expanding my work, writing for television and film. I'll always write for the theater, but it feels so right that I'm now getting to write more stories for the screen.

My favorite films put character at the forefront, aren't too interested in plot gymnastics, and take their time."

Hunter, who was also a writer-producer on four seasons of FX's "Baskets," has never allowed his work to be dictated by genre. "I need to focus on character and allow the world, plot, story and themes to grow organically. I've been really interested in some of the psychological thrillers/horror films that have been coming out recently. When it's done well, and is character-based, thoughtful, and not humorless, it can be so gripping and rewarding."

Reps: Agent:WME; Legal: Schreck Rose Dapello Adams Berlin & Dunham

Influences: Tony Kushner, William Faulkner, Annie Baker, Edward Albee

- Nick Clement

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Oh man, I had such a great time making and writing this movie, I would love to try making another movie." — Stefani Robinson



XIMENA GARCÍA LECUONA

"Anything's Possible"

Creativity often comes from deeply personal experiences. Lecuona's coming-of-age romantic comedy script, "What If?" (now titled "Anything's Possible"), first appeared on the 2020 Black List and 2019 GLAAD List.

"It came from a place of inspiration," she says. "It started flowing through me. I had to grab a pen and write it all down. I wrote it quickly because it was like a surge of inspiration. I didn't need to make myself sit down and write. It came very naturally." In a business in which nothing is certain, the stars aligned perfectly — Orion Pictures bought her script and attached Tony Award-winning actor Billy Porter as director. The film became Lecuona's first feature and Porter's directorial debut (starring Eva Reign and Abubakr Ali), released on Amazon Prime.

"Anything's Possible" is a high school trans woman's tale of romance, something Lecuona knows about, as she's also a transwoman. "I was thinking about my transition at the time," she says. "I was thinking about what steps I wanted to take. Everything I had noticed about trans people was so tragic. So, I was looking for stories like that to write about. On the other hand, I started seeing trans teenagers sharing their stories on Reddit and YouTube. They were falling in love and receiving all kinds of support, which was encouraging." Lecuona is developing a horror project called "No Ne Sigas" in Mexico and a half-hour TV show with Atlas Entertainment.

Reps: Agent:APA
Influences: "Mean Girls," "The Girl
Next Door," "John Tucker Must Die"
— Michael Lee Simpson



STEFANI ROBINSON

"Chevalier"

Robinson recalls reading about Chevalier de Saint-Georges, the protagonist of her film, "Chevalier," in high school. Robinson's mother had given her a book with a blurb about him in it. "To me, he just sort of read as someone who was Jimmy Hendrix or the Prince of that time, and he had that energy about him," says Robinson. "Since I was young I wanted to write a movie about him, because his life just was cinematic and his essence was incredibly cinematic as well."

Though the film centers on his life, Robinson doesn't consider it a biopic. "I think about the time of a transitional period about this man who is a composer and the emotional journey behind how he comes into more of an awareness or a self-awareness," says Robinson. Elements of his life particularly resonated with her. The idea, for example, that you can be in a group setting but also feel like you

have one foot outside of it at all times — something she particularly relates to as a Black woman in the entertainment industry.

Now that her film has been released — a cathartic feeling, she says — Robinson looks forward.

"Oh man, I had such a great time making and writing this movie, I think I would love to try writing another movie," she says. She loves working on television shows such as FX's "Atlanta" and "What We Do in the Shadows", but there's a certain beauty of writing a movie.

"You really get to play, I think, in a really interesting way that I think there's a lot of freedom there," says Robinson.

Reps: Agent: Gersh; Management: MGMT Entertainment; Legal: Ginsburg Daniels

Influences: The Mummy Ride at Universal Studios Florida

— Alexa Harrison

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I looked at NYU Film School at the time, I didn't see people like me. And it just seemed like too big of a leap." — Shiwani Srivastava



CARRIE SOLOMON
"Untitled Margot Robbie Ocean's Eleven Project"

Solomon was working as an assistant in 2018 on the set of "Ocean's Eight" when a particular line from the film struck her and sparked what is now the basis of the upcoming "Ocean's Eleven" prequel produced and starring Margot Robbie and directed by Jay Roach.

"By the time that I was somehow being regarded as a paid professional writer in this town, I'd met at Margot's company," she says. "I kind of just elbowed my way into a room that I probably did not have big enough britches for and decided I was going to convince everyone that I was the person to write this." While the film is tightly under wraps, Solomon shared how extensively she researched for the 1960s Europe set film, including reading more than 40 books and purchasing an encyclopedia set on crime.

2023 is shaping into a big year for Solomon with two upcoming Net-

flix features also expected: Her 2019 Black List script "My Boyfriend's Wedding" and "A Family Affair" directed by Richard LaGravenese and starring Nicole Kidman, Zac Efron and Joey King.

"It's been a supremely dissociative experience. I find myself constantly, just absolutely pinching myself. I'm not gonna lie," she says.

Solomon strives to create a body of work that is "like that feeling of downing a good piece of pizza."

"Walking out of a theater, getting up from your couch, going to bed — that is the feeling that I would hope to bring to this landscape if I could have any influence at all."

Reps: Agent: UTA, Management: MXN Entertainment, Legal: Yorn

Influences: Aaron Sorkin, Nora Ephron, Katie Silverman, Kate Cannon, Andrea Savage, Lake Bell — Alexa Harrison



SHIWANI SRIVASTAVA "Wedding Season"

Srivastava came to her career in a roundabout fashion after working as a freelance journalist, copy editor and copywriter. "I looked at NYU Film School at the time, I didn't see people like me. And it just seemed like too big of a leap." Years later she took a course in San Francisco, taught by "One Fine Day" co-screenwriter Terrel Seltzer. "I remember in the early 2000s seeing Mindy Kaling in 'The Office.' I remember 'Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle.' I mean it's funny, people think of it as just a stoner comedy, but to me it was so much more. It really made me think, 'hey I can write the movie I want to see and I think that was really what triggered me starting to take those classes." "Wedding Season" plucks from real-life incidents. "It shows the pressure of growing up in a community like that and sometimes the way that everybody is in each other's business," says Shrivastava, who now lives in Seattle. "I realized I missed having some of that." The film revolves around a couple that pretends to date each. It ranked among the top 10 Netflix films when it bowed Aug. 4. With no industry connections, Shrivastava entered her script in several contests. She came second in Screencraft comedy competition and later placed in the top 10% of the Nicholls Fellowship. Screencraft connected her with producer Swetha Shetty, Netflix and director Tom Dey. Now she is working with a friend on an animated movie for Reel FX with Kunal Nayyar attached, among others.

Reps: Agent: Valarie Phillips / A₃ Artists Agency; Manager: Nicholas Bogner / Affirmative Entertainment; Legal: Mark S. Temple

Influences: Nora Ephron, Amy Sherman-Palladino, Mindy Kaling — Shalini Dore

Hamptons Parties Like It's 2019

Festival reasserts itself as a must-stop on the awards season circuit • By Addie Morfoot



Don't expect any drive-in

screenings, virtual screenings, mask mandates or reduced capacity theaters at the 30th annual Hamptons Intl. Film Festival. This year's edition will look and feel as it did way back in 2019.

The Long Island-based fest, which runs Oct. 7-16, will screen 69 feature films and 51 shorts that are 54% female-directed and represent 34 countries from around the world.

Also back at HIFF are a bevy of fancy cocktail hours and the fest's Rowdy Talks series, which will include a conversation with director, screenwriter and producer Chris Columbus.

New this year? The festival will run over 10 days.

"Last year, we were seven days instead of our typical five," says HIFF artistic director David Nugent. "We did that to see if people would be interested in coming to see films midweek and they were, so we decided to expand." $\,$

One thing that will not feel different this year is the fest's core —its content and the unspooling of award season's buzziest film.

HIFF 2022 will offer audiences a sneak peek at some of the most eagerly awaited titles of the year so far, including Darren Aronofsky's "The Whale," Sarah Polley's "Women Talking," Sam Mendes' "Empire of Light," Michael Grandage's "My Policeman," Laura Poitras' "All the Beauty and the Bloodshed," Rian Johnson's "Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery," Florian Zeller's "The Son," and "Decision to Leave," directed Park Chan-wook.

Nugent has a gift for selecting films that strike a chord. A HIFF screener has won the best picture Academy Award in 11 of the past 12 years. "We try to screen what we think are the strongest films each year, and much to our delight, a lot of times, they've gone on to

win the best picture Oscar," says Nugent, who admits that studios and filmmakers alike view HIFF as a key stop on the award season campaign.

Micheal Ward

Colman star in

"Empire of Light,"

Sam Mendes'

screening at

festival.

the Hamptons

and Olivia

"The fact that we are in a part of the United States, which is very much an enclave for a unique group of highly influential people, whether it's publishers, editors, curators, but also a lot of Academy members, is appealing," he says. "I think it's one of the reasons that a lot of filmmakers, studios and distributors are interested in having us play their film here."

While Nugent acknowledges that HIFF is not known as a place to discover films, several movies are making world premieres at the fest, including Austin and Meredith Bragg's "Pinball: The Man Who Saved the Game," Xavier Manrique's "Who Invited Charlie?," Jules and Gédéon Naudet's "January 6th," Ricki Stern's "A Radical Life," Robert S. Bader's

"Groucho & Cavett" and Rory Kennedy's "The Volcano: Rescue From Whakaari."

Kennedy has participated in Hamptons Film Festival's annual SummerDocs series on three separate occasions but never attended HIFF with a film.

"The Hamptons team has cultivated an audience of documentary enthusiasts who come out for all types of great stories and films," says Kennedy. "We couldn't be more thrilled to continue our long-standing relationship with the festival for the world premiere of 'The Volcano: Rescue From Whakaari."

In addition to screening films, HIFF will honor actor Mariska Hargitay with the 2022 Dick Cavett Artistic Champion Award, and host a panel discussion with nonfiction filmmakers about documenting democracy. Additionally, there will be a screening of Apple TV+ documentary series "Gutsy," followed by an "A Conversation With..." discussion with the show's host and executive producer, Chelsea Clinton (Hillary Clinton co-hosts the series with her daughter).

While HIFF has previously included television and documentary series in its lineup, Nugent says it's rare.

"We thought 'Gutsy' would be of interest to our audience, but its inclusion is not suggestive of a move towards getting into doing a series section," he says. ?

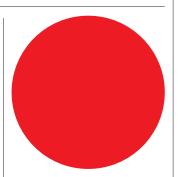
TIPSHEET

WHAT: 2022 Hamptons Intl. Film Festival WHEN: Oct. 7-16 WHERE: Hamptons, N.Y. WEB: hamptonsfilmfest.org

REVIEWS

Amsterdam

By Peter Debruge



FILM REVIEW

Director: David O. Russell

Starring: Christian Bale, John David Washington, Margot Robbie

 ${\it Christian Bale, Margot Robbie and John David Washington \, star \, in \, ``Amsterdam."}$



"A lot of this really happened," teases the opening card of David O. Russell's unruly ensemble comedy "Amsterdam," a loony early-'30s social satire that goes cartwheeling through a little-remembered episode in American history when fascists tried to overthrow the U.S. government. Russell clearly sees parallels between this alarming chapter of the nation's past and our present, as national divisions threaten to overwhelm American democracy, but the writer-director has complicated the plot — the movie's plot, that is, not the greater conspiracy on which it turns — to such a degree that audiences are bound to be bewildered. Instead of wondering which parts are true and which ones invented, they're likely to find themselves asking, "What the hell is happening?" for the better part of 134 minutes.

A certain amount of confusion is neither unusual nor unwelcome in comedic capers and whodunits, where the fun so often stems from 64 ● REVIEWS 10.04.2022

being bounced around by surprising developments (what happens to Taylor Swift in this film qualifies as such a twist). Back in free-wheeling "American Hustle" mode, Russell has an appetite for chaos that can be uniquely exhausting, and even though this oddball ensemble boasts intelligent ideas and a smorgasbord of against-type performances from A-list names, "Amsterdam" amounts to less than the sum of its parts.

The film centers on a friendship between three Americans drawn into an elaborate political intrigue. The trio were never happier than when they lived together in Amsterdam after the Great War. Encouraged to enlist (and perchance to die) by his high-society in-laws, Dr. Burt Berendsen (Christian Bale) lost an eye and half his face in conflict, but gained a lifelong amigo in Harold Woodman (John David Washington), a Black soldier who and this is among the film's "this really happened" details — was obliged to fight in French uniform since American troops refused to integrate.

Burt and Harold were both badly wounded in conflict, but had the good fortune to meet a spirited nurse named Valerie Voze (Margot Robbie) during their recovery. Bale burrows deep into this latest character, assuming the disheveled look and distracted manner of a young Peter Falk (right down to Burt's wonky glass eye, which never quite aligns with the working one), while Washington seems strangely superficial by comparison, his face fixed in that same blank expression that's fast becoming his signature. Robbie dazzles right away with her defiance, breaking the boys out of the field hospital — the Jeanne Moreau to their Jules and Jim.

For a brief, glorious moment in Amsterdam, the friends are spared the stresses of their lives back in America, their shenanigans somehow sponsored by two ornithophile spies (Michael Shannon and Mike Myers, the latter heavily disguised and accented), who promise, "We'll come a-calling at some point in the future." Alas, the trio's carefree days of dancing the Charleston among the Dutch are numbered - and just as well, since this cutesy segment of the story feels overly indebted to Wes Anderson, and not in a good way.

Most of the film takes place 15 years later, in New York in late 1933, as Burt and Harold agree to investigate the suspicious death of the superior officer who introduced them (Ed Begley Jr.), only to be framed for murder in the process. While the case doesn't seem to be of terribly pressing urgency to the police (Matthias Schoenaerts and Alessandro Nivola), Burt and Har-

old are determined to clear their names, which brings them back in contact with Valerie.

Russell cooks up plenty of high-end kookiness (which is to say, comedic situations set in the hallways and drawing rooms of polite-society houses, like something out of a Howard Hawks or Ernst Lubitsch classic, as opposed to flat-out farce), but through it all, the bonds between these three characters are meant to be the thing that keeps us invested. Russell has miscalculated something there, however, since the 15-year separation between the friends is resolved in the movie before they even have time to miss one another, and whatever chemistry existed between Harold and Valerie's characters never quite manifests on-screen.

From that snarky true-story setup, Russell's shtick involves pushing credibility to the limits except the three lead characters are complete fabrications. which sort of undercuts the joke. Even so, we're alarmed to discover that since her return, Valerie has been kept drugged up and locked indoors by brother Tom (Rami Malek) and his wife, Libby (Anya Taylor-Joy). Those two have some troubling political beliefs that are better left discovered in the film, though it's worth stating that the New York Veterans Reunion where everything climaxes was inspired by an actual event. The evening's guest speaker, Gen. Gilbert Dillenbeck, played by Robert De Niro, was inspired by real-life war hero Major Gen. Smedley Butler, who exposed a conspiracy dubbed the Business Plot.

Russell's truth-will-out, thinkfor-yourself political message is ultimately what makes "Amsterdam" appealing, though the film is being marketed largely on the popular appeal of its cast. That's a risky prospect for such an expensive picture, considering that hardly any of the stars delivers the thing that fans love most about their personas — except perhaps Chris Rock, who gets to crack wise about white supremacy. It's beautifully shot by cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, whose swooning mix of Steadicam and handheld techniques lent an almost godlike grandeur to recent films by Terrence Malick and Alejandro G. Iñárritu, though that fluid style combines rather oddly with Russell's more erratic comedic sensibilities.

The result has all the red flags of a flop, but takes a strong enough anti-establishment stand — and does so with wit and originality — to earn a cult following. There's too much ambition here to write the movie off, even if "Amsterdam," like the history it depicts, winds up taking years to be rediscovered and understood. 2

CREDITS: A 20th Century Studios release of a Regency Enterprises presentation of a New Regency, Dreamcrew Entertainment, Keep Your Head, Corazon Camera production. Producers: Arnon Milchan, Matthew Budman, Anthony Katagas, David O. Russell, Christian Bale. Executive producers: Yair Milchan, Michael Schaefer, Sam Hanson, Drake, Adel "Future" Nr. Co-producer: Tracey Landon. Director, writer: David O. Russell. Camera: Emmanuel Lubezki. Editor: Jay Cassidy, Music: Daniel Pemberton. Reviewed at AMC Century (City, Los Angeles, Sept. 19, 2022. MPA Rating: R. Running time: 134 MIN. Cast: Christian Bale, Margot Robbie, John David Washington, Alessandro Nivola, Andrea Riseborough, Anya Taylor-Joy, Chris Rock, Matthias Schoenaerts, Michael Shannon, Mike Myers, Taylor Swift, Timothy Olyphant, Zoe Saldaña, Rami Malek, Ed Begley Jr., Robert De Niro



The Lincoln Project

By Daniel D'Addario



TV REVIEW

Docuseries: Showtime (5 episodes; all reviewed); Oct. 7

With: Rick Wilson, Mike Madrid, Steve Schmidt

It's been said that former President Donald Trump corrupts all who enter his orbit — that it's impossible to deal directly with him without taking on his amorality and crassness.

"The Lincoln Project," a new documentary series on Show-time, depicts that process among his political opposition. Here, people devoted to ousting Trump mirror his rhetorical style and his self-regard. And it's in subtly making this case that the documentary succeeds, even as it grows punishing to watch.

The Lincoln Project, a circle of former high-level Republican strategists who made viral anti-Trump ads, seemed throughout the 2020 presidential election to be, Trumpishly, more focused on brand promotion than political work. "No one's ever fucked with a candidate like we've fucked with a candidate," Lincoln Project co-founder Rick Wilson says early in the doc; those schemes include a Times Square billboard, attention-getting for attention's sake.

In the months before the election, The Lincoln Project measures results in eyeballs and in cash; cannily, directors Karim Amer and Fisher Stevens include mentions of how many millions are rolling in,

Showtime docuseries "The Lincoln Project," with co-founder Rick Wilson, charts the group's work to thwart Donald

Trump's 2020

election efforts.

or a clip of a #Resistance devotee announcing they've "given more money to The Lincoln Project than anything else."

By series' end, we have seen the group disassemble due to vitriolic disputes over money and credit. But even early on, small inclusions rankle what at first seem uncritical and upbeat. For instance, co-founder Mike Madrid's declaration that, prior to Trump, he'd joined the Republican Party to "be with the strong leader" gently sidesteps the fact that this sort



of projected strength is exactly the reason Trump's supporters adore him; his fellow co-founder Steve Schmidt, a strategist to John McCain in 2008, seems to think that relentless criticism of Sarah Palin will undo his role in her ascension on McCain's ticket. And GOP consultant and Lincoln Project adviser Stuart Stevens grumbles on camera about the party's focus on white racial resentment; only later is his own history of boundary-pushing advertisements addressed.

Cleverly, the series allows the principals to reveal themselves with their own words and deeds. We see election night from Lincoln Project members' perspective, as though they were the protagonists, but already, more is at play. Dissension has entered the dynamic, with arguments over who's winning the media coverage and how resources are being allocated. So, too, has arrived an aroma of outright callousness. "You are reaching emotional res-

onance with people," Wilson tells an exhausted video editor who doesn't want to use footage of George Floyd's grieving family in an ad. "It's not exploitative."

It is, and that's the point. The group eventually collapses under the weight of its self-styled stars' egos. The bickering is gratifying, in that it reveals certain truths about human nature and about these humans, but, though well made, it's also wearying. Five hours is a long time to get to the conclusion that a group that spent the 2020 election laundering the reputations of former GOP operatives may not have been on the level. And it may lack for impact: Tapping into the electric charge of the man from whom they spin money and fame, The Lincoln Project's core personalities will always have their acolytes, convinced they are the only ones who can fix things. •

CREDITS: Executive producers: Karim Amer, Fisher Stevens, Vinnie Malhotra, Geralyn White Dreyfous, Lyn Davis Lear, Vijay Vaidyanathan, Jamie Wolf. 60 MlN. With: Rick Wilson, Mike Madrid, Steve Schmidt, Stuart Stevens



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66 ● FACETIME 10.04.2022

Paul Reiser

"Don't show me everything; don't show me the magic."

By Shalini Dore

Paul Reiser jokes that his audiences come in three age groups: Older ones are fans of "Mad About You," slightly younger ones know him from "The Kominsky Method" and the youngest from "The Boys" and "Stranger Things." Reiser's latest sitcom, "Reboot," bowed Sept. 20 on Hulu.

- How did "Reboot" come about? It came about because [showrunner] Steve Levitan is very smart and funny. He came up with this show, and they invited me to join, and they sent me the script. I thought it was great. For me, it was really sort of a bonus because it's a world I am so familiar with half-hour television, but from another angle.
- Like "The Kominsky Method," this show deals with behindthe-scenes moments in the TV industry. What is it that makes the topic so popular? One of the concerns that I know Steve Levitan had is, is it too inside; are people going to get it? I don't think it's a problem because, first of all, everybody's inside - every show is "We'll take you behind the scenes." That to me is too much. I'm like, "Can I just be in front of the scenes?" I don't want too much: Don't show me everything; don't show me the magic. Don't show me how you made that stunt. Let me just enjoy that stunt. Everybody knows show business; even people a thousand miles away from Hollywood know about rehearsals and cameras and reviews and executives, and the reality is it's not that different than most jobs. There's a boss; there's an executive; there's the grind. But having said that, there

Things you didn't know about Paul Reiser

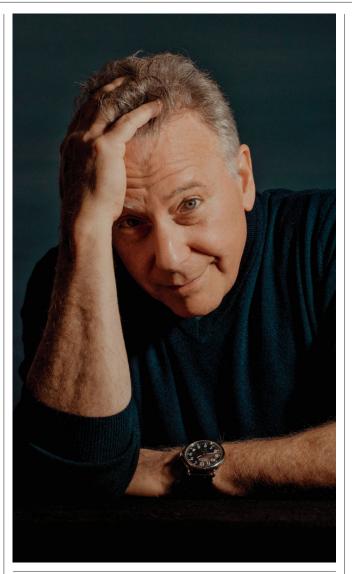
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Age: 66

Hometown: New York City

The write stuff: Although he has written for TV and film, he's never directed.

Interpreting an icon: He used the late mogul Robert Evans as the inspiration for his role as the villainous Legend in "The Boys."



are a couple of things that are so specific you'll enjoy it a lot more if you've been in that world.

• Why did you do the "Mad About You" reboot as a limited series? The only reason Helen [Hunt] and I felt it would be fun to do was that we're not going to try and pretend we're 30 years old. We ain't those people. But as real as the show was when it started it's about a new marriage — well, what would they be like now? They're older; they don't hear as well; they walk slower; their kids turned out to be a handful; the kids are now leaving.

- Tell us about the movie "The Problem With People." It takes place in Ireland, only because I wanted to go to Ireland. I'd been to Ireland 30 years ago and just loved it and always wanted to make a movie there in that beautiful countryside. But no one ever came up with one, so I wrote it. It was really great fun. It has Colm Meaney, who is a great actor, and we played two $cousins\,who've\,never\,met\,-\,never$ heard of each other. We come from descendants [where] three generations ago there was a feud of two brothers. The American side doesn't talk to the Irish side, and [Meaney's character] has decided let's just bury the hatchet, let's just get along. So I go to Ireland to make peace, and it doesn't go well. ... It will be released in the spring. It's still being edited.
- How do you find the time to do all these projects? I'm getting to work with really creative people. You know Steve Levitan — well, that's easy; Chuck Lorre ["The Kominsky Method"], sure; the Duffer brothers ["Stranger Things"], OK; and "The Boys," which was a surprise, because "The Boys" is a show that I would never have watched in a million years. In fact, my young son, when I told him, I asked him, "What's this show? Have you heard of it?" and he said, "It's great and you'll hate it." When I watched it, I didn't hate it. It took me a while to get what they were doing, but to go and play in that little sandbox was a lot of fun. 2



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